MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

AUGUST 50c PDC

The end of the trail had to be riddled with bullets, and his name was on all of them, as

MIKE SHAYNE

walked deliberately into a death trap to face—

THE MAN WHO NEVER FORGOT

A New Short Novel by

BRETT HALLIDAY

PARADISE NIGHTMARE

A Short Novel of Suspense by

ED LACY

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Please print **Aug.—196**

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

August, 1966 Vol. 19, No. 3

TWO NEW SHORT NOVELS

THE MAN WHO NEVER FORGOT

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Somewhere, hidden and deadly, a man with vengeance in his soul and murder on his mind had marked four men for death, as Mike Shayne took up a bullet trail to find the last victim—before Murder got there first!

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PARADISE NIGHTMARE

by ED LACY

Stormy, uncharted seas lay ahead, and Murder was the skipper, as my cruiser headed for a trip which would bring me a fortune—or death. Right now I needed money and I had a gun and could use it, so. . . .

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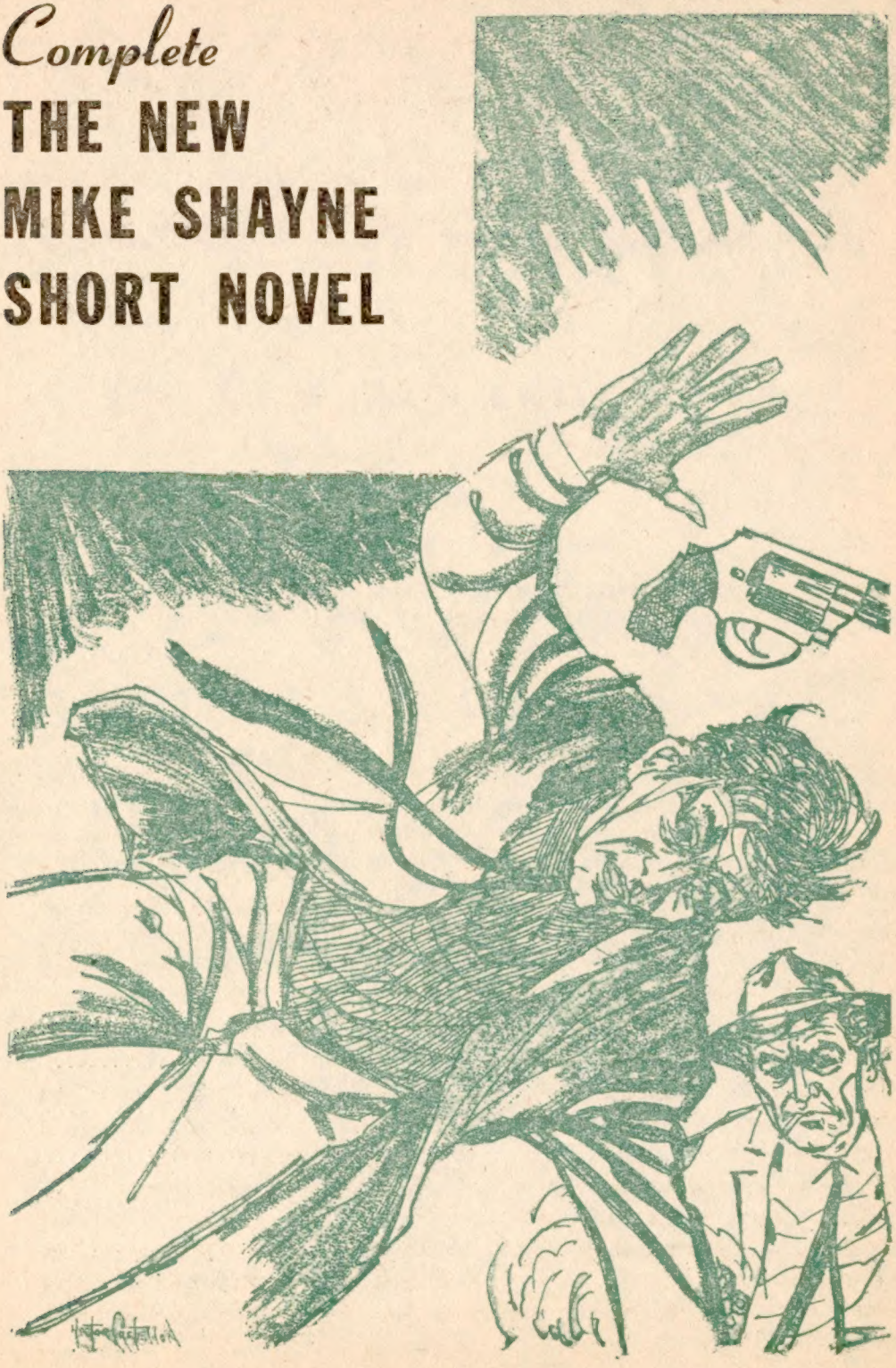
MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, VOL. 19, No. 3, August, 1966. Published monthly by RENOWN PUBLICATIONS, INC., 160 W. 46th St., N. Y., N. Y. 10036. Subscriptions, 12 issues $6.00; 24 issues $12.00; single copies 50¢. Second-class postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious. © 1966, by RENOWN PUBLICATIONS, INC. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. Postmaster—return 3579 to 160 W. 46th St., New York, New York. 10036

Complete

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL



THE MAN WHO NEVER FORGOT

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Somewhere, hate-crazed and deadly, a hidden avenger had sent three men to their doom. And somewhere, somehow, Mike Shayne must break through a gangland net of terror, before another man died!

IN THE BEGINNING it was strictly a routine affair, another job on his retainer arrangement with Inter-Continental Insurance Company. When Inter-Continental had troubles in Miami, they called on Michael Shayne. This one was even minor. A routine robbery case, pure and simple.

That was at the beginning.

It started with a telephone call from New York. All jobs for Inter-Continental started that way. Shayne was in his office on a quiet Monday morning. Ed Landers, investigator for Inter-Continental, was the caller.

"Just a small job, Mike, but right up your alley," Landers explained.

Shayne, seated at his sunny desk, could picture the heavy-set insurance investigator at his New York desk with the cold and rain outside. Landers would have his broad back to the window, his feet comfortably up on the desk, a thin, expensive Mexican cigar in his mouth.

"A party named Craswell and his wife. We carry a fifty thousand dollar floater on her jewels."

"Stolen?" Shayne asked.

"Last night," Landers said from far-off New York. "Clean job as far as I can tell. Professional. You can get the details from Will Gen-

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try's robbery squad. Usual terms, Okay?"

"What can I offer?" Shayne asked.

In a robbery, especially a jewel robbery, the quickest way to get the loot back was to offer a deal. The thieves usually returned the stones for the small percentage of their value, since hot stones never brought more than a fraction of their value anyway. It took a professional fence to unload hot stones; the thieves knew that if they were professionals.

"Give it a couple of days, Mike, to see what you can do. After that make it fifteen percent, no questions. Naturally, get them for free and it's a ten percent bonus for you."

"Right," Shayne said. "I'll get back to you as soon as I have something."

The red-head hung up and considered the potential. Ten percent, or $5,000, would be useful, but it was highly unlikely he would get it. Nine out of ten such cases ended up in a deal—professionals were too hard to catch. That was why the company was willing to pay off first and let the police catch the criminals later.

It was a simple matter of economics. The company did not want to pay off on a claim, then get the jewels back and go through all the trouble of trying to get their money back.

And everyday of investigation cost money. It was worth it to pay the thieves, avoid the claim and wasted time, and try to get some of their bribe back when the police finally caught the thieves. The pay-off went on the books as a business loss anyway.

Still, it was worth a try for the bonus. Mike Shayne hoped the thieves were professionals—they were sometimes easier to catch than amateurs. He pressed his inter-com button. The pert voice of Lucy Hamilton answered immediately.

"Yes, Michael?" his pretty secretary said.

"Get me an appointment with Lieutenant Vasco of the Robbery Squad," Shayne said. "And, Angel, dig out the files we have on jewel men in Miami, diamonds as a specialty."

"Right away, Michael," the brown-eyed girl said.

Vasco was busy until the afternoon, and the files yielded only six names, two of them out of circulation at the moment. Shayne spent the rest of the morning making telephone calls to his best informants. He offered his standing fee for information on the Craswell heist, told them to circulate the word. He then called Vernon Craswell and arranged a meeting for that evening.

Craswell sounded genuinely interested in getting his jewels back. "They are important to my wife," Craswell said on the phone. "The

money isn't that important. Can you get them back?"

"Most likely," Shayne said.

On his way to meet Lieutenant Vasco, Shayne decided that Craswell had probably been telling the truth, which removed one possible solution. In jewel robberies, it turned out too many times to be overlooked that the owner really did not want his jewels back. The owners took them themselves for the cash.

Shayne parked in front of headquarters, strode into the building and rode up in the elvator to the office of Lieutenant Vasco. It was then that the first unusual thing happened, something not at all routine.

Will Gentry, Chief of Miami police, was waiting in person in Lieutenant Vasco's office.

II

SHAYNE raised a shaggy red eyebrow as he saw his old friend waiting for him. Miami was growing too fast, and Will Gentry rarely took personal part in a simple case any longer. But the beetle-browned Chief was waiting and chewing on his ever-present black cigar.

Shayne sat down. "Hello, Will. What's up?"

"You tell me," Gentry growled. Vasco says you want to talk about the Craswell case."

Shayne nodded. "Inter-Continental called me, said it was strictly routine." Shayne looked at Vasco. "Isn't it, Vasco?"

"You mean the job itself? As routine as they come. Slick, but not too slick," Vasco said.

"Meaning?" Shayne said.

Vasco looked at Chief Gentry. The gruff Chief chewed on his cigar and nodded to Vasco.

"Fill him in," Gentry said.

"Well," Vasco said, "like I said, a simple heist. The Craswells were out at a party. The maid was home. The thief, only one, blew the wall safe. The safe was just tin. He cleaned it and got away. No prints, no one saw him except the maid. He moved fast as lightning; the place had obviously been cased. Like I said, a professional job."

Shayne nodded, "So?"

"Well," Vasco said slowly. "It was professional, but the MO doesn't fit. I mean, it doesn't fit any jewel thief in our files."

"Out of town?" Shayne asked.

"Maybe," Will Gentry said, "but it doesn't figure for an out-of-town boy to go to the trouble for such a small take. There's nothing special about the Craswells—just local people with a few bucks. Anyway, there's more."

Vasco rubbed his chin. "You see, Mike, I said no one saw him except the maid. She saw him because he rang the front bell! When she answered, he was wearing a rubber mask. He strong-armed her. Sapped her and tied her up."

Shayne tugged on his left ear-

lobe. "Strong arm? And wore a rubber mask? It doesn't sound like a jewel man."

Gentry nodded, scowled. "That's what I think. The MO fits a different kind of boy—mugger, bank robber, hold-up artist. That's why I'm interested. I don't like it when the boys branch out; it doesn't sound right. I thought maybe you might know something."

Shayne shook his head. "I don't. Landers made it sound pure routine."

There was a silence, and Shayne thought about a small jewel robbery by a man whose MO fitted an armed-robbery type more than a jewel man. It was the second unusual aspect, but Shayne did not really note it at the time. What he noted was that he would have to alert his stool pigeons. It had all the sound of a man on the run picking up some extra cash. That would make the job of the informers easier.

"Hell," Will Gentry said, "I suppose we've just got an odd-ball on our hands." The Chief stood up and grinned. "Or Vasco's got an odd-ball on his hands. All I have to do is sit back and complain about lack of results. If you come up with anything, Mike, you'll tell us?"

"Sure," Shayne said.

"I suppose Inter-Continental is ready to deal, as usual?"

"Naturally," Shayne said.

"Well, get your stones, but keep in touch," Gentry said as he left the office, a cloud of acrid smoke trailing behind.

Alone with Lieutenant Vasco, Shayne went over the robbery in greater detail. There was little else to learn about the actual theft. The maid had barely gotten a look at the masked intruder. The stones had not turned up anywhere yet.

Shayne got a complete list of them from Vasco. Then he headed for his interview with the victims, Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Craswell.

The Craswells, it turned out, lived in a large, but not too large modern house on the northern edge of the city. It was neither special nor spectacular, the house. It looked like it had cost money, but not a fortune. There were two cars in the garage. The door was answered by a small maid with a small bandage on her head.

Shayne gave her his panama, and detained her long enough to confirm that she had seen no more than she had told Vasco.

"It all happened so fast," the maid said.

"You saw nothing at all unusual?"

"Only that mask," the maid said. "And he called me sister. His voice was muffled. He called me sister, and hit me. When I woke up he was gone."

A straight enough story, but many such thefts had an inside connection. Shayne would keep the maid in mind. He kept her in his

mind for exactly another four seconds—as long as it took for her to usher him into the living room where Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Craswell waited for him.

After that he let his mind go blank and fill itself with nothing but Mrs. Vernon Craswell.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Shayne?"

She was tall and very lithe, blonde and tanned. She wore a simple white jumper dress that Shayne's trained eye guessed had cost a fortune to make so simple. Her skin shone; her muscles were firm. She did not look as though she had done an hour's work in her life—which, on her, seemed exactly right. A woman like Mrs. Vernon Craswell would be wasted on work.

Shayne sat down and reluctantly got down to business. He explained what Lieutenant Vasco had told him.

"Is there anything else you can tell me?"

Vernon Craswell shook his head. "No, that about covers it. We were out. He must have known that, the way he walked in so boldly. He also must have know where the safe was."

"Tell him about the brandy, Vern," Mrs. Craswell said.

"That's right," Craswell said. "That was odd. You see, he stopped long enough to have a drink—my best brandy. Very cool customer."

The detective made a mental

note. The thief was a very odd jewel thief. Brandy at the scene—it could very well be a trademark, but not the trademark of a jewel man. It had all the sound of a *pistolero,* a bandit of the armed-robbery type.

"And, you know," Vernon Craswell said. "I still don't quite believe it happened. I mean, we're not wealthy, well-known people. And the jewels aren't that special. I have them insured at fifty-thousand, but that's their cost and replacement value. A thief couldn't realize half that."

"Is there going to be any trouble about the claim, Mr. Shayne?" the beautiful wife asked.

"No," he said, "but we'll try hard to get them back first."

"Can you?" Mrs. Craswell said. "I'd prefer that. They have a lot of sentimental value to me."

"I think we'll get them," Shayne said. Actually, he was far from sure. From a professional jewel thief, there would have been no question. The thief would have been waiting for a feeler from Inter-Continental. But if this man was say, a gunman on the run who decided on taking jewels with him, he might not be aware of the normal procedure.

Still thinking about this, Shayne took his leave. The Craswells sounded, and seemed, to be just what they claimed. He could check later to see if Craswell needed cash. But his judgment told him that the Craswells were on the up and up.

Which left him with his informers, and the peculiar MO for a jewel man. The MO could be absolutely useless, since it fitted no known jewel man. On the other hand, if it was a local job, and it seemed to be, then he was looking for a brandy-drinking gunman who favored rubber masks, blackjacks and strong-arm tactics rather than the subtle approach. It could be enough.

It was late afternoon when he returned to his office, all prepared to get back to his informers with his new information. But he did not have to call them. The third peculiar thing happened. Lucy Hamilton was waiting for him with a message—an anonymous phone call about the Craswell robbery, a few minutes ago.

III

AT HIS DESK Shayne switched on his tape recorder and dialed the number the anonyous caller had left. When a gruff voice answered he used the words the caller had instructed.

"Call for John Paul Jones," Shayne said.

"You got a wrong number, buddy," the gruff voice said, and hung up.

Shayne hung up, lit a cigarette, and sat back in his chair to wait. It was probably one of his informers, and he had to wait until his message brought the expected results. It had been very quick work, which puzzled him a little. Still, if this was the work of a professional out of his normal field, the pigeons might easily have heard about it quickly.

Ten minutes later the call came. The voice was heavily disguised—low, pleasant. Shayne did not recognize the voice. But the man seemed to know him. The message was brief and to the point.

"You want the Craswell jewels, Shayne, go to Four thousand seven hundred twenty Dane Street, Room seventeen. Go easy—after ten o'clock."

And that was all.

"Where do you want the drop?" Shayne said.

There was no answer—the line had gone dead.

Shayne stared at the telephone. He played back the tape. There was

no mistake. He pressed his intercom. Lucy Hamilton came in. Shayne looked at his pert secretary.

"The first call, Angel—was there anything except the number and instructions to call back?"

"No, Michael," Lucy said. "Should there have been?"

Shayne tugged on his earlobe.

"Yes, there should have been."

The brown-eyed girl was puzzled. "Wasn't the message good?"

"Very good, Angel, and that's what's wrong. It was free."

"Free, Michael?"

"No pay-off, no drop."

"Perhaps he plans to call again," Lucy said. "I mean, after you get results."

Shayne nodded slowly. "Maybe, Angel, but it's a very unusual way for a stoolie to do business."

But his mind then turned to the tip. It sounded legitimate, even to the warning to be careful. It was a warning he did not need, not when he considered the nature of the thief involved.

This was no ordinary jewel man; this was a *pistolero.*

Then he thought that he had time for a leisurely dinner, and a drink or two. He left the office and found himself ensconced at an elegant tablecloth with a fine steak. It occurred to him, as he ate his fine meal, that he was counting his bonus already. If this worked he would get the jewels back without making a deal. There would be risk, but $5000 was excellent balm for risk.

Nine-thirty came at last, and Shayne climbed into his car and drove off. He drove carefully, checking to be sure he was not being followed. He checked his snub-nosed police special in the glove compartment in case he came running back weaponless. He checked his automatic, and placed it in his belt to be more quickly accessible.

Dane Street, as Shayne well knew, was not a nice spot. It was a tough slum in the worst section of town. An area of flophouses, shabby hotels, and seedy rooming houses. It was a maze of dark streets and darker alleys, and the people who lived on the street had need of the dark.

The house, 4720, turned out to be a shabby, three-story frame rooming house. Shayne parked a block away and walked to the building. It was set back a few yards from the dark street, and an alley ran between it and the flophouse next to it. Shayne knew that there would be an alley at the rear also.

He stood in the shadows and studied the place. Room 17 would probably be on the top floor. The fire escape was on the side. The windows that opened on to the escape were all dark, which probably meant that they were windows of the hallways rather than rooms.

It was always a difficult decision for a man on the run, whether to

have a room with or without a fire escape. A fire escape allowed quick escape if trapped, but it also opened another area of vulnerability. It depended on whether a man wanted escape or security.

If Room 17 were on the third floor, it was too long a jump to the rear alley. On the other hand, there was probably a back staircase in such an old house. The problem was one of surprise. With most jewel thieves Shayne would have been less wary, but this one sounded like the hard type.

The only light now was in a room on the first floor front. Shayne walked silently into the back alley to be sure. Then, as he returned to the street, a light went on on the top floor. He looked at his watch. It was just five minutes to ten. Shayne took a deep breath, loosened his automatic in his belt, and stepped quickly and quietly to the door into 4720.

The hallway was dim and grey, barely lighted by a single naked bulb. He heard raucous music and the clink of glasses in the lighted room on the first floor, but no one came out as he passed and stalked silently up the stairs.

At the third floor landing he paused. The hall that led to the fire escape was dim, lighted only by the emergency light over the window that opened on to the fire escape. There was no light from under the doors of any rooms but the one he had seen lighted from the street below. The number was not easy to see, but there was no doubt that it was 17.

In the line of light at the bottom of the door to Room 17 Shayne saw a shadow moving. There was noise in the room, and a radio playing on some rock-and-roll station. The occupant of Room 17 seemed to be feeling relatively secure. Shayne even heard the sound of glass, and ice, and liquid pouring.

Taking a deep breath, and hoping that his informer was not leading him into a trap or an illegal entry charge, Shayne stepped lightly down the hall. He had bad luck. Two steps from the door he hit a loose board.

The creak could be heard for a block..

"That you, Porter?" the voice said from inside the room.

Shayne stepped to the door.

"Yeah," Shayne said making his voice as low and neutral as possible. It worked.

"So come on in and get it. Door's open," the voice said.

Shayne threw the door open and jumped in with his automatic out.

But the man in the room was no fool. Even as Shayne opened the door the man must have had second thoughts about the voice that had answered him from the hall.

The man had dropped his glass and had his pistol halfway up toward Shayne. A short, slender man who fitted the maid's description. And a fast-thinking man.

"Hold it!" Shayne commanded.

A true *pistolero,* the man was having no part of a meek surrender. His pistol continued to come up toward Shayne, and, in a simultaneous movement, he hurled himself sideways and down behind the bed.

"I said freeze!" Shayne cried.

For answer, the man fired. The pistol was not yet aimed, and the bullet sang over Shayne's head. Shayne dropped, lunged to his left. The man behind the bed fired again. This shot was too close to Shayne for any more warnings. The big red-head fired four times into the edge of the bed where the man had last poked his head up.

There was a silence in the room.

Then a single groaning cough from behind the bed.

Shayne stood up and walked to the bed.

The man lay thrown back against the wall, his head a mass of blood. He had been hit twice in the head. The sight was not pretty. Fighting down a feeling of nausea, Shayne searched the dead man. He found nothing.

He found the jewels in the top drawer of the bureau. They were still wrapped in the cloth they had been stored in. Inside the cloth they were still in their boxes.

By now people had begun to come from their rooms. There was no phone in the room. Shayne went down to the front hall and called Lieutenant Vasco. In the room again, he kept out the curious and waited for Vasco.

Later, the police identified the dead man as Gordon Polk, alias Little Gordie, alias ten other variations of Gordon and Polk.

"A record a mile long, but clean the last couple of years," Vasco said. "Funny, he's been rousted for every kind of armed robbery, but never for jewel or burglar work."

Little Gordie went to the morgue. The jewels went back to to the Craswells. Shayne's report went to New York. And that ended it.

Or it should have.

IV

SHAYNE still had a faint twinge of uneasiness the next morning about the tip-off when he got the second call from New York. He was still wondering about a tipster who failed to ask for money, when Lucy buzzed him.

"Michael? Mr. Landers again."

Shayne picked up the telephone.

"Ed? You couldn't have my report yet," Shayne said.

Lander's voice was wary. "Report? What report?"

Shayne detailed the action of the night before. At the other end in New York Landers seemed to heave a sight of relief.

"So that's closed. Great work, Mike. You'll get the bonus," Landers said.

But Shayne had heard the initial wariness. "What is on your mind, Ed? I mean, if you didn't call about the Craswell job?"

"Another one," Landers said simply. "I was afraid we had an epidemic, but I guess it's just a coincidence, right?"

Shayne sat up behind his desk. "Another job? Here?"

He heard the sound of Landers flicking on a lighter. There was a brief silence and some puffing as Landers lighted one of his thin Mexican cigars.

"Another jewel robbery. Same kind of operation. Bigger this time, but the same lone bandit, it seems. A Mr. and Mrs. Walters of Miami Beach. Floater of one hundred thousand dollars on their jewels, primarily a perfectly matched ruby necklace."

Shayne nodded as if Landers could see him. "Okay, Ed, I'll get to this one. Same terms?"

"Same terms, lucky boy. You could get rich."

For some time after he hung up, Shayne sat swiveled around in his chair and staring out his window at Miami, glorious in the morning sun. Miami Beach meant Peter Panther, but that was not what was on the red-head's mind.

What he was thinking about was just how long it had been since he had two jobs from Inter-Continental in a row?

He knew what had been bothering Ed Landers—from time to

LUCY HAMILTON

time insurance companies were made a special target. Was some gang out to fleece Inter-Continental, perhaps because they knew that the company had no staff in Miami?

But, from the tip-off, they knew Mike Shayne worked for the company here. And what about that tip-off? A tipster who made no charge for accurate information? That could be, and probably was just a falling out in the gang.

But that would mean there *was* a gang.

Mike Shayne again contacted his informers. Then he got his pan-

ama, clapped it on top of his shock of thick red hair, and went out.

In his car he drove through the bright morning across a Causeway into Miami Beach. When he strode into Miami Beach Police Headquarters, Peter Painter kept him cooling for an hour. At last the Chief of Detectives let him in and waved him to a seat.

Painter did not wait for preliminaries. "I heard about last night. It sounds pretty high-handed to me."

Shayne smiled at the dapper little Chief of Detectives. Painter was dressed impeccably as usual, and did not see anything at all amusing. Painter fingered his pencil mustache and glared at Shayne.

"He invited me in for a talk and then pulled his gun," Shayne said blandly. "I had to defend myself."

"That's your story."

"And you're stuck with it," Shayne said. "I got the jewels. I had my job, Painter."

"You got a job now?"

"The Walters robbery. I'm for the insurance company."

Painter scowled. The little fashion-plate rubbed furiously on his mustache.

"I suppose I have to let you in. But no tricks, and keep that gun on your hip," Painter said.

"As long as I can," Shayne said.

"A cop who knows his work doesn't need his gun!"

"I agree, most of the time. Now how about some details?"

Mollified, Painter reached for his buzzer. When the uniformed policeman came in, Painter ordered the Walters file brought in. While they waited, Shayne smoked and Painter rubbed his mustache. At last the file came. Painter opened it.

"Here it is. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Walters, respected citizens, were out for the night. Maid, cook and gardener were in the house. They—"

"They saw the man? One of them?" Shayne said.

"No, no one saw him. It has all the earmarks of a really experienced cat-burglar. Made it in up a trellis, jimmied the upstairs windows so good we could barely spot it. Then he cat-footed downstairs to the small safe in Walters' study, and—"

"Blew the safe? With—"

Painter sat back. "You want to tell this, or you want to let me tell it?"

Shayne grinned. "Go ahead, Chief."

Painter nodded, read again. "He opened the safe without any tools. It's an easy box, but my Safe and Loft boys say it has the earmarks of a real box man. He opened it without a mark. He just let himself out the front door. No prints, no clues, no one saw him."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. A very different deal. This one was an experienced cat-burglar, probably a jewel man. And the loot was better this time. Perhaps there was,

after all, no connection. He thanked Painter, got up to leave.

He decided to call on the Walters, but he did not think that would turn up anything. This time it had all the proper appearance of a professional jewel job. He turned to go, and saw the look on Painter's face. The dapper little Chief of Detectives had the look he always had when he was about to be forced to ask Shayne a favor.

"Er, does the MO ring any bell with you, Shayne?" Painter said. "I mean, I know you keep a file. Maybe you have him in your—"

"You mean you don't make the MO?" Shayne said.

"Not the opening without tools. That's a real expert. We don't make him, and neither does Gentry in Miami," Painter said. The dapper little man was thoughtful. "I remember a guy, Tom Morris, who was that good, but he works up north. He'd be pretty old by now. Anyway, last I heard he was in jail."

It was the first peculiar thing about this job. Shayne left and went to his car. In the car he smoked and thought. One of the faint little alarms in the back of his mind was ringing.

One of the peculiar parts of Little Gordie's robbery was that a man like Gordon Polk would have been unlikely to know about the Craswell jewels. Now there was another man, not local, and how would he have cased the Walters job? And there was that voice from Room 17 telling him to come in—Gordon Polk had expected someone at ten o'clock.

It was nothing Shayne could put his finger on, but something was very strange. Perhaps the Walters could tell him someting after all.

V

THE WALTERS were a very different thing from the Craswells. The man who ushered him into an enormous living room was at least sixty-five, grey-haired, gone to fat in the Miami Beach sun. The woman who stood to greet him was a matronly lady of at least sixty.

"Oh, Mr. Shayne, you must get my rubies back! What good is the insurance to us!"

"I'll try, Mrs. Walters. That's my job."

"Of course," Mr. Walters said.

"Now, maybe you can help some," Shayne said. "Is there anything you didn't tell the police?"

They looked blankly at each other.

"Some little thing? All right, let it go a minute. What about your servants? Do you have any reason to suspect they might be involved?"

Mr. Walters bridled. "Certainly not! I'll vouch utterly for the staff here. Damn it, Shayne, they've all been with us for over ten years!"

"Perhaps they've had sudden expenses," Shayne said. He did not

think the servants were involved, but he was ruling nothing out. He wanted to touch, and clear, every base, because there was something strange going on. He felt it, and he wanted a clear field when he finally faced it.

"Our maid is a woman of forty who lives in and rarely goes out. Our cook is sixty and has been with me twenty-two years. The gardener is a widower who neither drinks nor smokes," Mr. Walters said acidly.

"All right," Shayne said. "But someone had to case the place, and case it thoroughly."

"Case?" Mrs. Walters said.

"He means observe the activities and physical arrangements here, dear," Mr. Walters explained. And he said to Shayne, "I'm sure someone did 'case' the place, as you put it, but I have no idea just—"

His wife interrupted. "Joseph, what about that strange man I saw you—"

Walters snapped his fingers. "Of course! Now how did we forget that?"

"Well, he wasn't around for long, and it was some months ago."

Shayne broke in. "What man? Something you forgot to tell the police?"

Walters nodded. "Yes, it was quite a few months ago, But—well, Martha had better tell you. She saw him."

Mrs. Walters seemed to be recalling. "It wasn't anything very much, but we have such a quiet community here. One day I just happened to see this man walking by out on the road. I think I noticed him because he was so distinguished-looking. I mean, most of the people here don't walk, you see?"

"I see," Shayne said. "Go on."

"Well, there he was, walking past. Then, the next day, I saw him again. That really made we wonder, and—"

"How many times in all?"

"Five times, over about two weeks. He was tall, well-dressed, grey-haired, really quite distinguished."

"And this was months ago?"

"Yes."

"You didn't see him recently?"

"No. Of course, people, other people, walk past. But I don't notice them. Just ordinary people."

Shayne nodded thoughtfully. Now he let his mind accept what it had been mulling—some master mind was hiring men to do the robberies. He was not sure, but it began to have the ring. Someone with access to Inter-Continental's files? It was a possibility.

Shayne stood up. "Well, thank you. I'll try to get your stones back."

Outside, in his car, Shayne lit a cigarette, thought for a moment, then decided to drive straight back to his office. He wondered if there would be an anonymous tip this time. But there was no anonymous

tip when he reached his office and greeted Lucy—the tip was well identified!

"A code call, Angel?" he said when Lucy reported.

"Yes, Michael. Benny Revere's code. It said you should go to *Dunn's Tavern,* next to last booth, order a sidecar as usual, and wait."

"Nothing else?"

"No." The pert girl frowned. "I wish you didn't have to deal with a person like Benny Revere."

"So do I, Angel, but informers are a big part of a detective's business. It's a bad, but necessary, aspect of detective work."

"I know, Michael," Lucy said sadly.

"Cheer up, Angel. I was beginning to think we had a bad one on our hands, but Benny makes it all routine again."

A tip from Benny Revere was nice and normal. And it would cost a nice and normal fat fee. Shayne decided to have his lunch first and let Benny stew a while. He went down to *Luigi's* for a good order of manicotti and lingered pleasantly over his wine.

About three o'clock he reached *Dunne's Tavern* and ambled in as if he had nothing more on his mind than a cooling sidecar on a hot day. In the back booth he lighted a cigarette, sipped his drink and waited. He waited three cigarettes worth.

Then there was a tapping. Shayne glanced around. The tapping continued. The detective saw that it was coming from the wall of the booth beside his head. The wall was draped with a decorative curtain. Shayne moved the curtain aside and saw a small hole.

"Greetings, shamus," the voice of Benny Revere said.

Shayne saw a faint light through the hole. He narrowed his eyes and made a quick memory-study of the layout of *Dunn's.* Then he smiled to himself. Very clever, Benny Revere. The hole had to be drilled in the side of the toilet booth inside *Dunn's* men's room.

"You've got a cosy place for talking," Shayne said drily.

Benny chuckled. "Not bad. I got it plugged on this side. It works two ways. Like this, and if I want to hear what the party in that booth is saying. Neat, huh?"

"You should have been a secret agent, Benny."

"What the hell you think I am?" Benny said.

Tired of the banter with a necessary evil like Benny Revere, Shayne got down to business. "You wanted this meet?"

There was a pause. "You want a man?"

"I want a man with a lot of rubies. You got the word," Shayne said.

"Maybe I know a man with rubies," Benny said.

"Don't fence with me, Benny. You know or you don't. You know the rate."

There was another hesitation

behind the wall. Benny, in the seclusion of the men's room and hidden behind a door, was unusually hesitant for him. Something seemed to be bothering Benny—something more than usual.

"Well," Shayne said, "I don't pay by the hour."

Behind the wall, Benny seemed to take a deep breath. "Pass it through. It's A-one."

"A-one?" Shayne said.

Again there was a pause. "I said A-one, didn't I?"

Shayne took a bill from his pocket. He looked briefly at the fine portrait of William McKinley, rolled it into a thin cylinder, and pushed it through the hole. It vanished. Then Benny's voice spoke fast.

"Jackson Hotel on Prado Boulevard. Room four hundred twelve."

"You got a name?" Shayne said.

"Morris, Tom Morris. The rocks are with him."

The faint light vanished from the hole. After a few minutes, Shayne had a quick glimpse of the scrawny figure of Benny Revere sliding out of the tavern. Benny would not stop walking for ten blocks. Business made Benny very nervous.

But it was not Benny Revere the detective had on his mind now. Tom Morris! That was the name Painter had used, a man who fitted the MO of the Walters robbery. But Painter had said Morris worked up north, had never been down here, and, from the way Painter had talked of Morris, it had sounded like Morris was a figure from a distant past.

It had sounded like Tom Morris was retired. Now, if Benny had the right dope, and Benny usually did, Tom Morris was out of retirement. Only—Benny had acted a little strange. Why? Shayne decided to puzzle that one out later.

Right now, he had a call to make.

VI

THE JACKSON HOTEL was a cut above the rooming house of last night—but not a big cut. Prado Boulevard was a boulevard in name only. It was narrow. By the time Shayne arrived, it was already in the late afternoon shadows.

The hotel itself was a six-story brick building that had seen much better days. It had a grimy marquee that proclaimed its name as if someone were still proud of it. Shayne parked a few doors down the street and again checked his guns. He had the eerie sensation of having lost a whole day somewhere.

He left his car, still thinking how long it had been since he had had two such cases on consecutive days. But this one, at least, fitted the routine. And the routine called for him to saunter casually into the lobby of the Jackson Hotel.

The desk clerk, a fat citizen of dubious age, eyed Shayne up and down and then came to something like attention. Shayne wore a clean suit and a tie, and his shoes were passably shined. The clerk did not see too many customers like that. The clerk smiled through tobacco-stained teeth.

"Yes sir! We've got a nice room, with bath. View of the city," the clerk sold.

"Air conditioned?" Shayne asked.

"Well," the clerk fawned, "no, we ain't got it in yet. We're going to, but we ain't—"

"Maybe I should wait," Shayne said.

The clerk, his face fallen, prepared to resume his true manner of surly indifference.

"But I've always wanted a view of the city," Shayne added.

The clerk brightened again with a flourish, handed the pen to Shayne for registration. Shayne sighed. He had found a man who believed in his work. He doubted that the clerk would feel so good after Shayne's business was finished in the hotel.

A senile bellboy hobbled up, but, alas, Shayne had no baggage. Still, there was to be no missed tip. The aging boy hefted Shayne's key and led the way to the single ancient elevator. The "boy" himself operated the elevator. At the sixth floor the elevator jolted to a stop.

In his room, Shayne tipped the relic and retrieved his key. He closed the door and surveyed his room. One look was enough. It had a view of slums and a bathroom where the faucet leaked. He gave the bellhop time to move his creaking bones into the equally ancient elevator. Then he checked the automatic in his holster, stuck it again into his belt, and left his room.

He walked down the hall to the stairs door. As he had expected, in such a shabby hotel, the door was unlocked and open. He went through and walked quickly down to the fourth floor. There he opened the door carefully and peered out into the hall.

The hall was long and narrow and not well lighted, but it was wider and better lighted than the rooming house last night. And this time he wanted to be more careful, he had no stomach for another gun battle. Tom Morris did not sound like the *pistolero* type, but you never could tell.

He made sure the hall was empty, and stepped out through the stairway door. He moved with amazing lightness for a man of his size. He found Room 412 at the far end of the corridor, to the rear. When he saw the location, which was directly beneath his own room, he was aware that he was dealing now with a smarter operator than the late Gordon Polk.

If he recalled his single look out the window of his room above, and he did, there was the roof of another building directly outside the window of Room 412. Which meant that Morris had an escape route ready. He backed off across the hall, raised his foot, and kicked hard.

The door flew in. Shayne hurled hurled himself across the room and skidded to a crouching halt, his automatic out and ready, directly in front of the window. His grey eyes took in the whole room at a glance.

The room was empty.

Swearing softly, Shayne prepared to put away his automatic when he heard a noise. A faint sound, practically undetectable. He held his gun and looked again around the room. There was a closet and a bed.

Under the bed there was nothing.

He jerked open the closet door. The closet was empty, except for an old suitcase and a single suit hanging on the bar.

But he had heard a noise.

He went to the window and looked out. The ledge was clear. Inside the room again he saw the one place he had not looked, the bathroom. He approached the closed door and jerked it open.

The bathroom, too, was empty.

Shayne turned away in disgust, and stopped. He turned back to the bathroom. The shower curtain was drawn. There was faint steam on the bathroom mirror.

"All right," Shayne said. "You can come out now, Morris."

His automatic was trained on the shower curtain. There was a silence, and then the curtain was pulled back and a man stepped out. The man looked at Shayne, and shrugged.

"I must have lost my touch. I guess I go back—right, Shayne?"

The man was dressed in slacks and a shirt. He was in his socks, which explained why he had moved into the shower with so little noise when Shayne broke in. He was medium sized, almost white haired, at least sixty-five. His hands were long and delicate. He had a smooth face that was very pale. He went past Shayne and into the room.

"You know me?" the red-head said.

"Who doesn't know Mike Shayne in my game?" the man said.

"You are Tom Morris?"

The man arched a brow. "Sure. So you didn't really know who I

was. How'd you find me? A stoolie?"

"Yes," Shayne said.

Tom Morris nodded. "It figured. I'm just too old, I guess. Been away too long. I figured that maybe down here I could pull the one job and retire. I never been in Miami Beach, you know? But I guess the crums know me, and I don't carry enough weight any more to clam them up."

"It was a clean job. Too clean, maybe," Shayne said.

"My MO? Yeah, I was worried, but I figured I'd be out of here before the cops got a make from up north. I never figured on a private like you. How come? Insurance?"

"Naturally," Shayne said.

"Well, here we go again. What's the play?"

"Up to you," Shayne said. "You're wanted in the Beach. I'm supposed to turn you over to Miami police, and let them hand you over to the Beach. But I'd rather take you over to the Beach and get it over."

"Why not? A cell's a cell."

"Where are the stones?"

"Bottom drawer. You're real lucky. I had 'em stashed, but today was the meet."

"Who's the fence?"

"You know better than that," Morris said.

Shayne retrieved the neatly wrapped jewels from the bottom drawer. Then he let Morris dress, and led him out and down in the elevator. The desk clerk blinked at them.

Shayne grinned. "Checking out, friend. Rooms six hundred twelve and four hundred twelve. This'll cover it all, right?"

He tossed a ten dollar bill onto the desk. The fat clerk's blink changed instantly to a smile. Shayne led Morris out to his car. He put his pistol in his belt, but ushered Morris into the driver's seat.

"You drive. I don't want to break any laws."

Morris drove them out across the Causeway and straight to Miami Beach Police Headquarters. Painter did not keep Shayne waiting this time. The dapper little Chief of detectives had an expression that made Shayne want to laugh out loud. It was a mixture of elation at having a crime solved so fast, and chagrin at having Shayne solve it. Not that that little circumstance would ever appear in Painter's report.

"Okay, Shayne. Good work. I'll take over from here."

"You want the stones?"

"Of course."

"I'll want my report signed for the insurance company," Shayne said.

The little Chief scowled, but nodded. "Sure, sure. So, I was right, it was Tom Morris. I never forget an MO."

Shayne had to admit that Painter had lucked out there, and

the dapper detective would make the most of it. Now Painter looked hard at TomMorris.

"How come you came down here?"

"The climate," Morris said.

"I thought you'd retired," Painter said.

"I guess I should have," Morris said.

"You're retired now," Painter said.

"You can't win 'em all," Morris said.

The two men glared at each other. Shayne decided to take a hand.

"What do you know about Gordon Polk?" Shayne asked.

"Gordie? I know him," Morris said.

"You knew him," Painter said.

Morris narrowed his eyes, leaned, and sat back. "Gordie got it?"

"Last night," Shayne said.

"Too bad. But he was a trigger-happy punk," Morris said. The box man looked at Painter. "You gonna book me or hold a seance?"

"Were you and Polk working for anyone?" Shayne asked.

"Come on, Shayne," Morris said.

Painter pressed his buzzer. A uniformed policeman came in. Painter waved at Morris.

"Take him out and book him."

Grudgingly, Painter thanked Mike Shayne, and the big red-head left. In his car again he drove back in the twilight across the Causeway. He decided to stop off at the office. Two arrests in two days had made him feel tired and dirty. He wanted a good steak and some pleasant company. He decided to take Lucy to dinner.

As he strode into his office, knowing that Lucy would be there late as it now was, dinner flew from his mind. It was the look on Lucy's face. She pointed to a note she had left on his desk.

"Mr. Landers," the brown-eyed girl said.

"Ed Landers? Again, Angel?"

"Yes, about fifteen minutes ago. He said it was urgent. I called Painter, but you had already left."

Shayne nodded, tossed his panama on the hatrack in his private office, and sat down behind his desk. He had a cold sensation in the pit of his stomach. He reached for the telephone.

When Ed Landers came on, Shayne knew there was real trouble. It was after six, and Landers was in his office

"I waited for your call, Mike."

"I picked up a guy for the Walters job, Ed. I got the stones. A pro named Tom Morris," Shayne reported.

"I've heard of Morris," Landers said, "good work."

There was a tone in Landers' voice that was not elation. There should have been elation. Shayne waited. He knew what was coming, but he waited.

"Yeah, Mike, a third hit. Last night in Miami. The report was delayed."

Shayne waited.

"Three in two days, Mike," Landers said. "It doesn't play. How many jobs do we have in Miami in a year? Three? Five? We don't write that much coverage in Miami."

And there it was. It had started as routine. It had become peculiar. And now it was impossible. Landers had it right: Shayne averaged about three to five jobs a year for Inter-Continental. Now there were three in two days. It was now out of the realm of coincidence—or was it? Yes, he said to himself. It was.

"Tell me about this one, Ed," Shayne said into the phone.

He did not mention another very odd circumstance that was ringing loud bells in his mind. Not only did he average only three to five jobs a year for Inter-Continental, but it usually averaged six days to two weeks to solve such a job. Now he had solved two of them in two days!

Landers explained the new job. "In Miami, a safe this time. In the Bacarrat Art Gallery. We cover the whole operation."

"How much?"

"About twenty thousand dollars cash, and a couple of rare miniature statues worth about another twenty-five thousand dollars."

"That's all?"

Landers said from New York, "Mike, what the hell's going on? Why Inter-Continental?"

"I don't know, Ed. But I'm going to find out."

Shayne hung up. He lighted a cigarette. His appetite was long gone. He clapped his panama back on and left the office. Now he really wanted a talk with Tom Morris.

VII

PETER PAINTER grudgingly let Shayne talk to the old box man. Morris was in his cell, surprised to see Mike Shayne so soon again, but wary.

"Three jobs against Inter-Continental in two days, Morris," Shayne said. "That's not coincidence. You admit your knew Gordie Polk. Polk isn't a jewel man, and this isn't your area. Someone hired you boys. Someone cased the jobs for you and hired you. Probably for a flat fee. No trouble fencing the stuff."

"You're dreaming, Shayne," Morris said.

"Is someone out to hit Inter-Continental? Is there an inside man?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Look, Morris. You're no kid, and you're going up for a long time. Polk is dead. I got you both on tips. You hear that? Both of you on tips to me. Why?"

"Both?" Morris said.

"Both."

Morris leaned back on his bunk. The old thief seemed to be thinking. Then he shrugged.

"Who knows? You got good informers."

"You don't know what's happening?"

"No," Morris said. "Maybe I could guess, but I'm going back in, and this time I don't figure to walk out. What difference does it make? Anyway, I'll tell you real straight, I don't *know* what's happening."

Shayne watched the old man. It was clear that Morris was going to say no more. Shayne left Morris staring up at the ceiling of his cell. The old man did not seem unhappy; obviously he had seen a lot of cells.

In the night Shayne sat in his car and thought about it all again. The speed of the tip-offs puzzled him. If someone were out to get Inter-Continental, who was tipping it all off? And, anyway, the second tip had not been unusual; it had come through Shayne's normal channels. Then he thought about Benny Revere and the little pigeon's peculiar manner.

Benny had been hesitant to give him the information. Benny had never been hesitant before when he had an item.

Shayne started his motor, shoved the car into gear, and drove back over the Causeway in the night. His method of getting in touch with Benny Revere was devious, but he wanted to talk to Benny very much.

At the first tavern he found in Miami proper, he parked and strode in. He went to the telephone booth and dialed the special number. A woman answered as usual.

"Tell Abe his brother wants to talk to him about the funeral," Shayne said.

The woman hung up. Shayne dialed a second number. The voice that answered was that of a man.

"Tell Abe his brother needs cash for the funeral."

"Where does Abe reach him?" the voice said.

Shayne read the number off the pay phone. He hung up. He went out and ordered a cognac. When he was almost finished his first drink, the telephone rang. He let the bartender answer.

"Anyone named Abe Jones?" the bartender called.

"That's me," Shayne said.

He took the telephone and said, "Jones here."

"Dunn's Tavern, same place," and the voice was gone.

Shayne paid for his drink and walked out of the tavern. In his car he drove straight to *Dunn's*. He went to the next to the last booth and waited. This time there was no wait. The voice of Benny Revere whispered through the tiny hole from the men's room.

"Yeah, shamus?"

Shayne heard it—a certain nervousness in Benny's voice.

"That tip, Benny. Where'd you get the details?"

"You know I can't—" Benney sputtered on the other side of the wall.

"Cut it, Benny. You were worried about that tip. Damned worried."

There was a silence. Benny was almost scared when he whispered again.

"Didn't it pay off? Morris wasn't there?"

Now Shayne knew the answer, but he had to confirm it.

"So you didn't really know yourself, Benny. Yeah, he was there. It worked fine; the McKinley is all yours. Only that wasn't a personal tip, was it? Someone handed it to you."

Benny seemed to heave a deep sigh of relief. "Okay, shamus. That was a free tip to me. It sounded good, and I checked the hotel for a guy like Morris, but I didn't dig it out myself."

"How?"

"Phone tip, no name. I took a chance."

"You got a tip on the phone and passed it on?"

"Yeh, like that."

"Next time, tell me," Shayne said. "Understand?"

There was a thin snicker. "What the hell, it worked."

The little plug was pushed into the hole and Benny was gone. Shayne did not even bother to watch the little stoolie leave this time. So, there he had it. His free, anonymous tipster again. It made no sense at all!

If someone was out to set up a series of robberies against Inter-Continental's clients, then who and why on the tips? Who was turning in the thieves? And why tips to him instead of the police? Someone was making him rich. Why?

Shayne went to the telephone. He called Lieutenant Vasco. The Robbery Squad lieutenant was out. Shayne left a message for Vasco to meet him at his office. He left *Dunn's* and went to his car. He drove as fast as the law allowed to his Flagler Street office.

Lucy Hamilton had gone home; the office was empty. Shayne went around and turned on all the lights. Then he took off his jacket, hung his hat, loosened his tie, and sat down behind his desk. He switched his phone to direct reception. Then he reached into his bottom desk drawer and brought out his bottle of Remy Martin.

By the second drink, the office

still silent, nothing but the distant and constant night sounds of Miami, he decided he had better eat. He ordered four hamburgers, two orders of French fries, four containers of coffee, and two orders of cole slaw.

Lieutenant Vasco arrived just in time to have his hamburgers and french fries.

"Sit down," Shayne said. "I figure this is going to be a long night. Any luck on the Bacarrat job?"

Vasco sat down. "Don't tell me, Mike. That's Inter-Continental, too?"

Shayne nodded grimly. "If the pattern keeps up, I'm going to be getting a tip. One way or the other. This time I want to get it first hand. Can you stake out some men around here, just in case?"

"Sure. You think it might be a personal appearance this time?"

"He's tried two other methods. I doubt if it'll be an appearance, but maybe I can hold him long enough for a trace. Anyway, when it comes I want you around this time. I figure it has to be some central organizer."

"It could be just coincidence, Mike. I mean, what the hell is the reason?"

"I don't know, Vasco, and it could be a coincidence."

But Shayne did not believe that. The two men ate. Vasco made his calls.

And they waited.

It was a long wait.

They dozed. Toward dawn they shaved and washed up.

Still they waited.

At eight-thirty Lucy Hamilton arrived. She was carrying a small envelope. She held it out to Shayne.

"It was slipped into the janitor's door downstairs," the brown-eyed girl said. "It's addressed to you, Michael."

Shayne swore. "Okay, Angel, and thanks."

He tore open the envelope. He read it and passed it to Vasco. It was crudely printed in pencil on Greyhound Bus stationery. It read:

Mike Shayne:

I work down the bus depot. I don't know, but this guy he looked funny. I think he carried a gun. I could see it. He checked a package in a locker. I know he got a gun and he looked scared. I heard of you. Maybe you oughta see.

Joe Riccardo.

P.S. Locker 420.

Shayne swore. "A hundred to one there isn't any Joe Riccardo. I'd have believed it, though, if it wasn't for the other two tips."

"You think this is it?" Vasco said.

"That's it, all right. Let's go and see."

The squad car was ready and waiting downstairs. Shayne rode with Lieutenant Vasco. They reached the bus depot in a few

minutes, and stopped two blocks short. Vasco instructed the uniformed men to stay hidden. The plain-clothes men were to mingle with the passengers in the depot and watch locker 420.

Shayne and Vasco themselves found a booth in the depot lunch room from where they could watch locker 420. They ordered more coffee, which they needed, and began the long, weary vigil. Except that the vigil was not long at all.

They had barely finished their first cup of coffee when Shayne bent, *hissed*, "Look! I should have known. My tipster has a way of getting the victims here on time."

Vasco wiped his mouth and looked covertly.

A tall, thin man stood in front of locker 420. The man was highly nervous. He seemed suspicious, his darting eyes searching the entire bus depot. That he carried a gun was very clear; it bulged out of his suit coat like an orange in a back pocket.

The obvious gun made Shayne wonder again. Was it all coincidence? Was there a Joe Riccardo who had seen this man put something in a locker?

"There!" Vasco said.

The thin man had screwed up his courage and quickly opened locker 420. The package he removed was fairly bulky. He turned quickly and walked toward the exit.

"Okay," Shayne said, "start it moving."

Vasco spoke into his miniature walkie-talkie. "Suspect coming out main exit. Tall, thin, dark-haired, slight limp in left leg. Brown suit, white shirt, brown tie and no hat. Pistol bulge under left arm. Carrying plain wrapped brown paper package. Follow and don't lose but don't be seen. Keep in close touch!"

Vasco nodded to Shayne. "Okay, Mike, let's see where he leads us. Your tipster is going to be disappointed this time."

"I hope so," Shayne said, as the two men sprinted for Vasco's car.

Already the radio was crackling with reports. "Suspect in old coupe, moving south, driving slowly. Unit one is ahead of him, Unit two here behind."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. The chase was on. Shayne hoped that there would be one very surprised tipster at the end of the chase.

VIII

HALF AN HOUR later the old coupe was still proceeding south out of the city. The pursuers had changed positions regularly, dropping the coupe and picking it up again with another unit, so that the thin man would not become alarmed. Now the car of Vasco and Shayne was in the following position.

Soon the coupe turned off the highway into a dirt road. Vasco checked the map.

"It comes out on the cross highway," Vasco said. The lieutenant picked up his microphone. "Unit six, cover exit of dirt road half a mile north of Johnson's Motor Court." Then Vasco nodded to his driver. "Let him get ahead and follow."

When the coupe was out of sight, the driver turned the car into the dirt road and followed at a cautious speed. For half a mile they saw no sign of the coupe. Then, as they came slowly around a curve, Shayne pointed to where the coupe was parked behind a small wooden shack off the road.

"This is it," Shayne said.

"Stop," Vasco said to the driver. "Back away out of sight."

They backed around the curve. Vasco spoke into his microphone. "All units. Suspect parked at shack half a mile down old Jenkins Road from U.S. One. Move in from both sides and block road." Vasco clicked off his mike. "Okay, Mike. Let's see what's going on in that shack."

Vasco sent two of his men north of the road through the woods to the other side of the shack. The driver was left to cover the front of the shack. Vasco and Shayne moved in from this side. They circled silently to the rear.

Moving in close, they heard voices in the shack. There was the sound of someone laughing. A bottle clinked against the edge of a glass. One of the voices rose.

"You know the deal. A flat price, no tricks," the voice said. "I got the stuff. Pay me and I'm on my way, Porter."

Shayne narrowed his grey eyes. Porter! It was the name Gordon Polk had used, the man Polk had expected to meet at ten o'clock at 4720 Dane Street, when Shayne had arrived instead! The red-head motioned Vasco forward. They reached the back door of the shack in silence—then Vasco stepped on a loose stone.

The stone rolled away. Vasco, to catch his balance, grabbed the side of the house. The stone struck a tin can.

"Out there! Someone!" the voice inside the house cried.

Swearing, Vasco drew his Police Special. Shayne had his automatic out.

The voice screamed. "Back, coppers! I ain't going back, you hear! I ain't going back!"

Three shots ripped through the door.

Vasco and Shayne dove for cover.

Vasco swore. He had been hit on the shoulder. Shayne crawled to the door. It was open. He rose to his knees, jerked the door open, and hurled himself inside.

"I ain't going back!" the voice screamed.

Two more shots splintered wood

beside Shayne. He rolled to the cover of a heavy chair. Outside the police were running up. The tall, thin man seemed to hear them. Shouting, he broke for the back door past Shayne.

"No! You ain't taking me back!"

Shayne dove to tackle the man and missed.

The man broke past him and out the back door. Shayne was up. The man raced for the cover of the woods. Vasco's men came around the shack. Hearing them, the man turned and blazed away. He had two guns now, one in each hand.

The police went down. One had been hit. Then they answered with a fusillade and the tall, thin man went over like a pole-axed steer. He quivered on the ground for a second, and lay still. The police approached him cautiously. One of them looked up to where Vasco was seated against the side of the shack. The policeman shook his head.

The tall man was dead.

Shayne, in the shack, turned to face the second man.

He was a small, portly man of about fifty. He stood at a table over an opened brown-paper package. He had taken no part in the battle, had, until a moment ago, been crouched safe behind a heavy chair. Now he stood and raised his hands.

Shayne walked to the table and looked down at the package. It contained two small statues and a bundle of money. Shayne studied the man.

"I ain't armed, copper," the man said.

"No you wouldn't be. You let the others do the dirty work."

"Sue me," the man said.

"Your name's Porter?"

"Sure. Jason Porter. So you got me. Take me in."

"How long have you been a fence?"

"Who knows? I lost track," Jason Porter said.

Lieutenant Vasco, patched up temporarily by his men, came into the shack. Two of his four men were with him. Vasco looked at Porter.

"He's dead, the other one. The meat wagon's coming," Vasco said to Shayne. "This the boss?"

"It looks like it," Shayne said. And he turned to Vasco. "We better get you back, and get him down to interrogation."

"Me?" Porter said. "What the hell? I'm a fence. You got me; what else?"

"That's what you're going to tell us," Shayne said.

Sirens wailed outside as the police cars came in. Shayne helped Vasco out. Other police herded a protesting Jason Porter.

Six hours later, six hours of sweating, Shayne had learned no more. Jason Porter sat in the glare of the single light in the interrogation room at Miami Police Headquarters, still protesting.

"Once more," Shayne said wearily. Vasco had allowed him to conduct the questioning while the lieutenant was tended to. "You admit you're a fence; you hired all three of them to do jobs. Polk for the Craswell theft, Tom Morris for the Walters heist, and Eddie Cicatta for the Baccarrat Gallery job."

"Like I said. A straight deal. Cold cash, twenty-five thousand dollars on the line when they brought me the stuff. No questions, no delay, no trouble for them. They deliver and I pay off and they're out of it," Porter said.

"Only two of them are dead, and the third is in jail. On tips! Only one ever got to you, and that was because we let him!"

Porter was sullen. "I don't know about no tips!"

"Come on! Who else could have tipped us!"

"Why should I tip? Why? I got a good deal going. The stuff was worth a lot. Why should I tip you?"

"That's what I want to know," Shayne said. "We were tipped. All three of them walked into traps. You hired them. No one else knew about the jobs!"

"I never tipped!"

"Why Inter-Continental? Why were they all insured by Inter-Continental?"

"So it was a coincidence."

"You know better."

"I told what I know. It was a good deal. Why should I fink?"

"Where'd you get the cash? Seventy-five thousand cold cash *before* you fenced the stuff?"

"I got it."

"How? A punk like you never saw seventy-five thousand dollars! You never had the money, did you? You conned them, and tipped, and hoped to pick up the loot free! Only something went wrong. You never got the loot. You—"

"All right! All right!" Jason Porter shouted.

The fat little man slumped in the chair, covered his fleshy face with his hands. His shoulders sagged. He breathed heavily. Then he shrugged and looked up at Shayne.

"Okay, he gave me the cash. He worked it all out."

"He? Who?" Shayne snapped.

Porter shrugged. "I don't know."

"He gave you seventy-five thousand dollars and you don't know *who?*"

Porter shrugged again. "You think we ask for references in my business? I saw the color of his money. What could hurt me in the deal?"

Shayne stared at the fat little fence. The others in the room hard-bitten policemen all, stared just as hard. If Shayne had taken a poll, Porter would have been damned as a liar, and stupid one, by all present. But Shayne tugged very lightly on his earlobe. The

whole sequence of events was strange enough. Why not one more twist?

"Start from the beginning," Shayne said.

"What's to start?" Porter said. "I'm a fence, not big, not so small. I been around; I been doing business a long time. So I get this contact—on the up and up. I know the source, see? It's a two-way safety contact. A guy calls me, arranges the deal. He calls the principal and says I agree. You know?"

"You mean someone you know contacted you. In turn the same man contacted the originator of the deal. All on the telephone, no one ever saw each other?"

"You got it, Shayne. Safe all around. Or I figured it was safe. I guess I'm gettin' too old," Porter said.

"Okay, go on. What was the deal?"

"Like I said, simple as hell. The principal wants me to hand pay them, get the loot, turn it over to him. That's it. My share was a solid $25,000 too. I guess I don't see that."

"Who picked the jobs?"

"He did, the guy who arranged it."

"Who picked the men to do the jobs?"

"Same thing, he did. And—" Porter hesitated.

"And?"

Porter shrugged. "That's not so usual. But who was I to argue with a cool twenty-five thousand dollars for just being a messenger boy?"

"How did you get instructions?"

"First contact by telephone, like I said. The rest on a special drop —general delivery, main post office," Porter said.

"He gave you the jobs, and the names of the men to contact for the work?"

The fat man nodded.

"Sent you the cash?"

"Yeah. Only—"

"Only what?"

"Only he sent me just the first twenty-five thousand dollars, see? I mean, that figured. He sent me twenty-five thousand dollars to pay Polk. When Little Gordie delivered, I was to pay him, take the loot to General Delivery, name of Anton Moro, and then pick up the next twenty-five thousand dollars. See?

"I mean, that was the right way to do. One at a time, money, loot, money. When I turned over the last package, I'd get the last pack of bread, my twenty-five thousand dollar. It was a standard system, very professional."

Shayne tugged on his ear, harder now, angry. It was an excellent set-up. Porter, with an easy twenty-five thousand dollars dangled in front of him, money without even the sweat of fencing hot goods, asked no questions. Why should he? A smooth operation, the loot

not even in his hands for long. Except for the tips.

And the three men hired for the work, why should they ask questions? To them, Porter was hiring them for salaried jobs. Porter was known to them. And twenty-five thousand dollars clear without the trouble, or the wait, of fencing hot loot?

"The men you hired, on orders, did they all need a quick bundle?" Shayne asked.

"Who knows? They jumped at it, anyway. Little Gordie would take anything, just a punk. Morris seemed like he wanted a cool nest egg, you know? Eddie Cicatta talked about money for home. I figure he was up for deportation if he got picked up," Porter said.

A beautiful set-up. But why? And why all Inter-Continental jobs? What was worth seventy-five thousand in cold cash? And Shayne suddenly realized how clever the set-up really was.

"How much cash did you actually see from your principal, the guy who set it all up?" Shayne asked.

Porter stared at him. "You ain't been listening? Hell, I saw twenty-five thousand dollars, no more. How could I? No one ever showed up with the loot to sell until Ciccata, and he didn't collect, did he?

So there it was. A great scheme that risked only $25,000. Shayne thought. The man he wanted, the unknown and very careful principal, had certain definite qualifications. First he had to have at least $25,000 cash and know his way around the underworld.

Second, he had to know Miami, have some good idea of the lay-out of the various targets. He remembered the distinguished grey-haired gentlemen seen by Mrs. Walters.

Third, he had to know the three men involved; he had named them to Porter for hiring. Fourth, a corollary, he had to know that the three men would accept the terms —in other words, that they needed money.

Somehow, somewhere, there had to be a connection between the unknown "principal" and Polk, Morris and Ciccata.

But the quicker way was through Porter. Shayne faced the fat little fence. What he had in mind was a faint hope, but it was worth a try.

"Porter, you're going to take the money and the two statues from the Bacearrat Gallery and deliver them to Anton Moro at the post office. Got it?"

Porter shrugged. "Why not?"

It was a very long shot. Someone had tipped Porter about the location of the loot and Eddie Ciccata. It was probably the unknown principal. If that was so, then there would be no contact at the post office. But there was a chance it was, after all, someone else doing the tipping.

IX

THEY WAITED, Shayne and two of Vasco's men, until noon. Porter delivered the package for Anton Moro. There was no envelope waiting. Porter sat and Shayne and the police watched. No one came. Nothing happened. The package was not picked up.

Shayne left Porter there with Vasco's men, but he did not think anyone was going to appear now. He returned to police headquarters. There was a message for him to go to Chief Gentry's office. When he walked into the Chief's office, Lieutenant Vasco, patched and bandaged and his arm in a sling, was waiting with Gentry.

"How is it?" Shayne asked.

"I'll live," Vasco said.

Gentry chewed on his black cigar. There was a pile of folders in front of him. Three folders, to be exact. Shayne looked at them, arched a thick red eyebrow.

"Sit down, Mike," Gentry said.

Shayne sat. Gentry opened the three files. The gruff Chief chewed angrily on the cigar.

"Vasco filled me in," Gentry said. "You remember I thought something was screwy at the start. Polk didn't fit. When Vasco told me about all those very convenient tips to you, I got to thinking. Mike, someone set this whole thing up to get those three guys."

Shayne nodded. "Yes, that's the way I see it. And it just about has to be the unknown party who hired them."

"All right," Gentry said. "Now, if all three were targets of the same guy, then they ought to have something in common, right? They're not all jewel men. They're not all box men. Morris is an old box man, experienced, skillful. Gordie Polk was a two-bit gunman with more trigger than brains.

"We just ran Cicatta down. Long record, too. All out of state. Mostly as a driver of getaway cars. No jewel record, no burglary raps. There is nothing in any of their records to indictae they ever worked together. Certainly not Morris—he was always a loner."

"Yeh," Vasco said. "It was something you said. The way Mor-

ris acted like he was resigned to going *back?* Well, I remembered that Cicatta yelled about how he wasn't going *back*. Get it?"

Shayne got it. "Prison! Gordie Polk?"

Gentry chewed on his cigar, nodded, looked down at his files as if to check once more. Then he looked up at Shayne.

"It's right here. Tom Morris got out of Atlanta Penitentiary just two weeks ago. Gordon Polk got out a month ago, also Atlanta. Eddie Ciccatta was released a week ago—from Atlanta!"

There was a silence as the three sat with their own thoughts. Shayne was the first to break the silence. The red-head stood and began to pace, his hand pulling lightly on his left ear-lobe.

"All just got out of Atlanta," Shayne said. "They would be on their uppers. Jason Porter, a known fence, offers them all twenty-five thousand dollars, for what looks like an easy night's work. No loot to get rid of. Pick up the money and blow. Two days in town, maybe, no more. And in Miami, a town none of them ever worked."

Shayne stopped, looked at Gentry and Vasco. "How could they turn it down? It would be money in the bank. Morris said he wanted one more job, a little nest egg. A punk like Polk would jump at twenty-five thousand dollars after a stretch. Cicatta, well—"

Gentry looked at a folder. "Married, two kids, been away ten years. One kid college age. I guess he wanted a nest egg to take home, too."

Another silence. They were criminals, all three, Polk was not worth a tear. But—it was not something to wish on Morris and Cicatta. Out of prison, framed back in, one to his grave.

"He couldn't have been sure we'd kill two of them," Shayne said.

"No," Gentry said.

"So prison would have been good enough."

"Grand theft, armed robbery—you name it. Good felony charges, and with their records? We'd throw the book at them. Morris is right; he'll never get out alive," Gentry said.

"He wanted them out of circulation," Shayne said. "Right back in after they got out."

"That's what it looks like," Vasco said.

"And no other connection?" Shayne said.

Gentry shook his head. "They couldn't have known each other before Atlanta. They all worked different cities, were in different lines. They all spent stiff terms in Atlanta."

Shayne said, "Then maybe I should visit Atlanta."

"My idea too," Gentry said. "You know, we don't really have a crime here yet. Tipping is no crime. In fact, it's a duty to report

knowledge of criminal actions. All we have is Porter's word that someone else put him up to arranging these jobs. I'd have a hard time convincing the mayor a trip to Atlanta is in order for any of my men. No, Mike, you go."

"My pleasure," Shayne said. "It was me he tipped. I don't like being used."

"Dig deep, Mike, We might have a hell of a time proving any crime here."

"I'll dig to hell if I have to. Whoever it is, is making me do his dirty work," Shayne said grimly.

The red-head strode out of the office and, in his car, drove to his own office to check on the first flight for Atlanta. Gentry would arrange that he got in to see the warden.

* * *

THE WARDEN of the federal prison at Atlanta greeted Mike Shayne with a smile. The smile turned first to a frown, and then to a certain sadness as Shayne finished his story.

"Morris picked up? I'm sorry. He's not a bad man in his own way. Just too old to change," the warden said. "And I really hoped Cicatta would make it. Dead, you say? Yes, he hated it in here. His wife is quite a nice person, really."

"What can you tell me about them?" Shayne asked.

"The three of them? Well, nothing special. They were typical inmates, no worse and, in Morris's case, a lot better than most. Cicatta was angry, a bitter man, and Polk—well, I think you know about Polk. Polk had to end up dead from a bullet."

"Nothing special?"

"Individually? No."

Shayne sat alert. "But together? There is something?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, there is, or was. About four years ago we had an attempted prison-break. It was rumored that there would be six men in the break attempt. As a matter of fact, we had a tip to that effect."

"A tip? You mean the break was informed on?"

"It was. Much of our information comes, unfortunately, from informers. I doubt if a prison could be run without them. Anyway, we had the tip. When the night came we were partially fooled. The attempt was made an hour early."

"It failed? You got them all?" Shayne asked.

"It failed, but there was only one man. He got as far as a door that would have led him out into the loading area. He refused to surrender. I'm afraid he was killed."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "Only one man? Killed?"

"He was armed; he opened fire. My men had no choice," the warden said.

"But only one? My three were

supposed to have been in the break, too?"

The warden nodded. "Yes. Morris, Polk and Cicatta were definitely involved. Of course, we couldn't prove it."

"But it was known?"

"I think so."

Shayne leaned forward in his chair. "Six men planned an escape. Five did not try. One did and was killed. It was common knowledge that my three were in on it, and chickened out. And I suppose it was common knowledge there had been a tip-off?"

"I suppose so," the warden said thoughtfully.

"What was the name of the prisoner killed?"

"Bercy, James Bercy. You don't forget something like that. We have few escapes, even attempts here."

"What can you tell me about him? His friends? A wife?"

"Well," the Warden said, "he was a young man, about thirty. He was in for some kind of mail fraud. I remember that he was a quiet boy, but very unhappy in prison. He had quite a time to serve. I wasn't surprised by his escape attempt."

"Friends?"

"No, not really. He was fairly close to Morris and one of the others who we thought would try, Paul McGrath. But he rarely had visitors. Only one, as a matter of fact, his father."

"Just his father? Do you remember the father?"

The warden laughed. "No, we have a large prison. Some of the guards might."

"Or perhaps this McGrath. You said there were five who failed to make the attempt. Can I talk to McGrath and the other one?"

"Cordoba, Raul Cordoba," the Warden said. "No, you can't talk to them. They were released."

"Released!" Shayne snapped. "You mean, all five are out?"

The warden nodded. "Yes, McGrath over a year ago. Cordoba just this week."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. Five! Not three. Porter had not mentioned five. Shayne stood up and thanked the warden.

"Could you send Bercy's record to Chief Gentry?"

"Of course."

Outside, Shayne got to the airport as fast as he could. He took the first flight for Miami. In Miami he drove fast to police headquarters. Even then he was too late.

Lieutenant Vasco greeted him. "Yeh, Mike, another. Your secretary called me two hours ago. Ed Landers of Inter-Continental just called you about a fourth burglary. A one-hundred thousand dollar job on the diamonds of a night-club singer. No tip yet."

"I'm not sure there will be," Shayne said. "Get Porter up here."

The fat little fence seemed un-

disturbed by his sudden return trip to interrogation.

Porter bummed a cigarette, sat smoking.

"How did you contact your principal after each job?"

"I didn't."

"Then how did you tell him when you were going to meet with the men to pick up the loot?" Shayne pressed.

"I didn't. It was all pre-arranged. Each guy was told to expect a meet at a different time after his job. The place was arranged beforehand, too."

"So your principal doesn't know we've picked you up?"

Porter shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe, maybe not."

Shayne asked Vasco, "Was it in the newspaper?"

"No," the lieutenant said.

Shayne tugged on his ear. "Then maybe we will get another tip." He looked at Porter. "Why didn't you tell us there were five jobs, not three?"

"You didn't ask me."

"You're in real trouble," Vasco said. "You knew about two robberies we could have stopped."

"How much trouble can I get in? What more can you do, Vasco? Besides, what makes you think you could have stopped them? The boys never told me exactly when they were going to do the jobs. They called me when the jobs were done. I ran an ad in the Personals to tell my principal the job was done."

"Who robbed the night club singer." Shayne snapped.

"Dawn Hale? That was Cordoba," Porter said.

"Where is he?" Vasco asked.

Porter told the lieutenant.

"And McGrath?" Shayne said. "Paul McGrath; he's the last of the five."

Porter hesitated, then shrugged. "Okay. He's supposed to knock off a house out near the Craswell place. Party named Fuller, rocks worth maybe seventy-five thousand dollars. Place is five-hundred four Flamingo Drive."

Porter was led out and back to his cell. The fat little fence puffed on his bummed cigarette as he went. Vasco picked up the telephone.

"Any report on a robbery at five hundred-four Flamingo Drive? People named Fuller?" Vasco waited. Vasco listened. The lieutenant nodded negatively at Shayne. Vasco spoke into the telephone. "Okay, set a stake-out at the address. Right, a full stake out. And then go and pick up Raul Cordoba. Watch out. He may be dangerous."

Vasco hung up.

"Want to come?" he said to Shayne.

Shayne shook his head. "No, I want to find out just what's going on."

"Maybe Cordoba or McGrath can tell us."

"Maybe," Shayne said, "but I

doubt it. You go ahead. I've got an idea."

After Vasco left, Shayne picked up the inter-office phone and asked to see Chief Gentry.

X

IN GENTRY'S office Mike Shayne lit a cigarette. The red-head was stymied. Will Gentry had the records of all five men, and James Bercy in front of him now. Cordoba had been picked up, and would not talk. Paul McGrath had not yet appeared at the house on Flamingo Drive. But none of this was what was bothering Shayne.

"No connection among the six before Atlanta," Gentry said. "None at all."

"It was a chance. I thought maybe there was some past loot one of them was after. What about young Bercy?"

Gentry read. "Only that one conviction, mail fraud. He was from New York."

"And McGrath? He hasn't shown. Maybe he's behind the whole thing. Any reason he would want to get rid of the other four?"

"Maybe, but not from the record," Gentry said.

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "How about this? McGrath was the one who tipped the escape up in Atlanta. He's afraid the others will find out, so he wants them all put away one way or the other."

"It's possible," Gentry agreed. "He's been out the longest, and he's the only one we haven't picked up yet."

"It would be pretty clever to include himself in on the jobs," Shayne said. "He'd know his way around the underworld."

"What about knowing Inter-Continental's files?"

"We'll check," Shayne said.

Gentry scowled, chewed on the stump of his cigar. "Still, Mike, if any of those four had known McGrath was the one who tipped the break, I don't think McGrath would ever have left Atlanta alive."

"Maybe they found out after he left. He was the first one out," Shayne said.

"Well, let's see if he shows," Gentry said. "And let's check up on your other idea."

Mike Shayne had had another thought—the jewels. There was a time lag between theft and arrest. Perhaps the jewels had been switched! Somehow fakes put in the place of the real thing between the time of theft and the arrest. So that what the police had was a crook and fake jewels!

Gentry picked up the telephone to the laboratory.

"Anything on those stones?"

Gentry listened, nodded, hung up.

"No go, Mike. They are all the real thing," the Chief said.

Shayne stood up. "Okay, Will, I'm going back to my office. Let

me know as soon as you hear anything on McGrath."

Gentry nodded moodily. Shayne went out and down to his car. He drove wearily through the evening to his office. Lucy Hamilton had gone home, and he sat alone behind his desk, looking out at the lights of Miami on a hot night.

There was one small thing missing. He knew now what was happening. What he did not know was why. It seemed to be for no reason other than to destroy at least four men. And all they had in common was that they had all just come out of Atlanta Prison

He picked up the telephone and placed a call to Ed Landers in New York. The insurance investigator was working late. Shayne explained the capture of Cordoba, and the possible fifth robbery by McGrath.

"Does the name Paul McGrath ring any bells, Ed?" Shayne asked.

"McGrath? No, Mike, not to me."

"Whoever is doing all this has to have some access to the Inter-Continental files," Shayne said.

"Not necessarily, Mike. A jewel thief could find out, none of those policies were new," Landers said. "People talk. The policy-holders could have let it slip over the years."

"I suppose," Shayne agreed. "Anyway, check on any Paul McGrath in your records. And what about someone named Bercy?"

Landers was silent a minute. "No, no Bercy either, Mike. I can't think of anyone by that name around here."

Shayne nodded. "Okay, Ed, but keep at it, will you? I've got a hunch the key is somewhere up there in your office."

"Will do, Mike."

Landers hung up, and Shayne went back to staring out the window, tugging on his earlobe. He sat like that for some ten minutes. It was the last chance he had to sit and think for some time. Ten minutes after Landers hung up, the telephone rang in Shayne's office. It was Will Gentry.

"McGrath showed, Mike," Gentry snapped.

"They got him?"

Gentry swore. "No, he gave them the slip. He spotted the stake-out, Mike. One of our rookies is going to be pounding a beat for a while again!"

"He escaped!"

"After he spotted the stake-out, Vasco spotted him, but he gave us the slip. We've got an APB out on him now. You want to get over here?"

"I'm on my way."

Shayne clapped his panama on his thick red hair and half-ran from his office. Gentry was in Vasco's office. He was red-faced.

"Like a damned amateur! He slipped right through. Ditched his car about four miles away. I figure he picked up another. We got

a report on a stolen car from the area where we found his car. There's an APB out on that, too."

"It happens," Gentry said. "From his record he should head West. Kansas City is home base for him. We've alerted the KC Police. The buses, trains and airports are all staked out. He's bottled in."

But McGrath was not bottled in. Less than one hour later the report came in: the stolen car had been found at the Miami airport But there was no report of McGrath from the airport. Vasco called his men.

"Let's get out there," Vasco said.

They reached the airport with sirens wailing, but they could have spared themselves the effort. Three uneasy police stake-outs admitted that they had not spotted McGrath. The car was sedately parked in the parking lot. No other cars were missing. Vasco was disgusted.

"He's given us the slip for now. Some stake-out men I've got. We'll just have to wait for the APB to get results. My guess is that he's free and clear out of Miami."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "It looks that way. But he may be boxed in."

"And we could take a month to dig him out."

Shayne nodded. "All right. It looks like a trip to New York."

"To Inter-Continental?"

"Yes, and to see if I can find the father of James Bercy," Shayne said.

He left Lieutenant Vasco wearily, and with no real hope of success, organizing a search of the airport, a scanning of passenger lists, and an interrogation of airline personnel.

Shayne went home to get a night's sleep. Tomorrow he would be on an early plane to New York to see what he could find at Inter-Continental.

XI

MIKE SHAYNE made his first stop in New York, after leaving his early morning jet, at downtown police headquarters. His old friend Lieutenant Naudes was little help. Naudes dug out the old file on the late James Bercy.

"Not much, Mike. He was just a kid, tried a little insurance swindle by mail. We nailed him; he got ten years."

"Insurance swindle? Did he work for an insurance company ever?"

Naudes studied the folder. "As a matter of fact, he did. Inter-Continental! He was office boy, or sort of a junior trainee there when he was just a kid."

Shayne tugged on his ear. "It all comes back to Inter-Continental. Whoever arranged all this had to know a good deal about the company and its policies. Tell me, was

Inter-Continental involved in the mail fraud? I mean, did they prosecute, give evidence? Some reason for a grudge?"

Naudes read again, shook his head. "No, nothing. Bercy hadn't worked for them for a couple of years when we picked him up. As a matter of fact, he hadn't worked for anyone. He was an arrogant young punk. Still, he had a pretty good education. This doesn't say how."

"How about relatives?"

"Only a father. James J. Bercy, Sr."

"Business? Address?" Shayne asked.

"That was over ten years ago, Mike. The file lists the father as retired even then. Address was one hundred-five West Seventy-fourth Street. But you know New York."

Shayne knew New York. Still, it was worth a try. The fate of young James Bercy was beginning to assume the mantle of the only thing the five ex-cons had in common. He took a taxi uptown to West 74th Street.

It was a wild goose chase. Not only was there no James J. Bercy, Sr., and no one who had ever heard of such a man; the building no longer belonged to the same people who had owned it ten years ago. Giving up, Shayne taxied back down to the offices of Inter-Continental. Ed Landers was waiting to take him to lunch.

"You should take me, with all the money you've made," Landers said. "You're sure you didn't rig all this yourself?"

"Don't even say it," Shayne said. "It looks too possible. Ed, those five men were set-up for trouble like clay pigeons."

"And Inter-Continental got clipped along the way. I mean, how did we know all the heists weren't legit?"

"We'll work it out," Shayne said.

Later, at lunch, Shayne said, "I don't intend to profit by this; it's like cheating." And the red-head tugged on his ear-lobe. "Ed, I've never run into anything like this. Those guys are no better than they have to be, but it makes me a little sick to think of someone using me to kill them!"

"You got one, Mike, and Polk deserved it," Landers said.

They finished the rest of their lunch in silence. Afterwards Landers reported that Vasco had not located McGrath yet. The one missing ex-con had not appeared in Kassas City or in any other place where he might likely be.

After lunch Landers and Shayne went back to Landers' office. Shayne wanted to go over the entire personnel list of Inter-Continental.

"James Bercy worked for you, and you didn't know that?" Shayne said.

"He worked for a year or so over ten years ago! You want the

names of anyone who ever worked for us?"

"That's the way it looks," Shayne said.

Six hours later, with darkness coming down over the city outside the high window of Landers' office, Mike Shayne sat back and swore. Landers looked like a man who has run fifty miles and has fifty more to go.

"And they envy the work of a detective," Landers said.

Shayne stood and paced. "It had to be someone who works here now, or used to work here. There's no other explanation for how five robberies all were of people insured by Inter-Continental.

"And it has to be someone with a hell of a grudge against five—no, four men. It could be McGrath. Vasco could be right and McGrath is protecting himself because he was the man who tipped on that prison break.

"McGrath is a jewel man, we checked. Now a jewel man might have ways of finding out who insures who. But McGrath has been out of circulation for a long time."

Shayne stopped. "No, wait! McGrath got out of Atlanta a year ago. That would give him plenty of time to set up this whole affair, find out about those Inter-Continental policies. It took some time to set up this mess."

And Mike Shayne stopped again. "Damn it! If it was McGrath, why would he show up at

that Flamingo road house? Unless, maybe, he wanted to throw us off. He spotted the stake-out pretty well. He'd know about Porter, all right, and how to set it up.

"Still, it doesn't sound like the kind of operation a professional hood would choose. Why not just hire some hooligan to get rid of them? Guns are a dime a dozen. Damn it, Ed, it's too complicated for a guy like McGrath."

Landers had been listening carefully as Shayne brainstormed. Now he nodded slowly in the negative.

"I don't know, Mike. McGrath had a year to set it up. Hiring a professional killer is risky. Sure, it's a more certain method. But then the gunmen's got a hold. This could have looked real safe to McGrath."

Shayne tugged on his ear-lobe. He tugged hard, his grey eyes like points of steel. He seemed to be studying the dark sky outside the high window of Landers' office.

Now he shook his head, swore softly.

"Damn it all, Ed, we're missing something, some key. It's right in front of my nose, but I can't place it. I mean, I don't think McGrath would have done it the way it was done. Not *all* Inter-Continental cases."

"So who else do we have?"

"Bercy, the father. Let's say he blames the five for getting his son killed? Now there's a motive."

"But there isn't any Bercy working for us, near us, who ever worked for us!" Landers said. We've checked back over fifteen years—nothing. Except for the young James Bercy, we just don't have any Bercy around here!"

So absorbed in their speculations, the two men had not heard the office door open. Now, when the voice spoke, they all but jumped. It was a woman's voice. Landers' secretary, Nyra, stood there holding two containers of coffee. But what she said, now, took all thoughts of coffee out of their minds.

"Bercy?" Myra said. "Do you want him, Mr. Landers?"

Both Shayne and Landers stared at the girl with their mouths hanging open. They blinked. Landers was the first to find his voice.

"What?" Landers said.

"Bercy. If you want him I think he's back," Myra said.

Where he stood Shayne suddenly came to life. "You mean there *is* a Bercy working here, Myra?"

Now it was Myra's turn to blink. "Of course, Mr. Shayne."

Landers swore. "Damn it, Myra, I don't know any Bercy around here. He's not on the personnel list."

"Berce? Of course he is, Mr. Landers. He—"

Landers' jaw dropped a foot. "Berce! Damn it, Myra, we want someone with a *last* name of Bercy, not a *first* name." And Landers laughed. "Mike, she means old Berce, our custodian. The janitor."

But Shayne was busy with his ear. "What does he look like?"

"Tall, grey-haired, really quite distinguished looking when he's dressed out of his work—" Landers stopped.

The two men stared at each other. Shayne turned to Myra.

"What's his last name, Myra?"

"Well, gee, I'm not sure. He's been around here so long, almost forty years. We just call him Berce, you know? Wait, I think, yes, James! Bercy James!"

In the silence, Shayne ran his finger down the list of Inter-Continental's current personnel. His finger stopped at a name.

"B. J. James, Custodian," Shayne read. "Bercy J. James. No wonder we missed it. Just initials. B. J. James, or James J. Bercy! Ed, it's got to be our man!"

"But, damn it Mike, old Berce has been with us since the dawn of

time. Why, he was here when that James Bercy kid was here. No one ever connected—"

"No," Shayne said. "He's a janitor! He didn't want anyone to know he was the boy's father!" Then Shayne seemed to remember something. "Myra, you said you think he's back?"

Myra nodded. "He's on vacation, Mr. Shayne. Has been for two weeks. He's due back today or tomorrow; I'm not sure which."

Shayne paced. "Vacation where, Myra?"

"Where? Gee, I don't know. Wait, I think one of the girls got a card from Florida!"

After the girl had gone out the two men sipped their coffee. Then Landers stood up. Shayne nodded.

"You have his address?"

"Yeh," Landers said. "You think he'll be there?"

"Maybe and maybe not. We better look."

Landers nodded. The two men checked their guns before they left the office.

XII

THE ADDRESS of Bercy J. James, Custodian, was a brownstone building on West 76th Street, less than two blocks from the old address given ten years ago by James J. Bercy, father of a boy who had made a mistake and gone to prison, a boy who died in prison.

Shayne and Landers left their taxi at the corner of Amsterdam Avenue and 76th Street, and stood in front of the yellow-stone building of the Riverside Funeral Home. They walked up 76th Street together toward the building. They stood on the street in front of the building in the dark. Landers turned to the red-head.

"Should we both go up, or should one of us cover the roof?" Landers said.

"He doesn't know we're on to him," Shayne said. "I don't think he'll put up a fight anyway."

"I don't know, Mike. If he *is* behind all this, he must be a little bit insane now."

Shayne nodded. "I suppose so. All right, you go up. I'll take the roof and come down."

"I'll give you time to get up. When you're ready, lean over and give me the signal."

"Right," Shayne said.

The red-head turned and entered the next building. He climbed the stairs silently and reached the ladder up to the roof. The door to the roof was locked on the inside. Shayne opened it and stepped out into the dark of the roof.

It was a flat roof covered with tar paper. A low parapet ran around the entire building. On either side of the parapet were the roofs of the adjoining buildings—one long, continuous stretch of roof separated by the low parapets. Shayne climbed over to the

roof of the building where Bercy J. James lived.

As he climbed, he became aware of a shadow coming from the other direction. He dropped flat to the roof in the shadow of the low parapet. The shadow moved straight to the entrance from the roof down into the building.

It was a man.

Shayne watched for a moment. The man had clearly not seen him. Later, Shayne blamed himself for waiting too long. He hesitated there where he lay, and then he saw that the man carried a gun in his hand.

Shayne started to move just as the man opened the door and vanished into the building. It was only then that Shayne suddenly realized what was happening. He leaped up and sprinted for the door.

It was locked inside!

Swearing at himself, Shayne reached into his pocket for his special key ring. It took him five tries to find the skeleton key that fitted. He jerked the door open and plunged down the steep stairs to the top landing.

The apartment of B. James, alias James Bercy, Sr., was on the third floor. Shayne raced down the stairs, making no attempt now to be quiet. He reached the Fourth floor, and turned along the landing.

The two shots seemed to rock the building.

A voice cursed.

The shots and the voice were from the third floor.

Shayne pounded down, but alert now. When he was halfway down to the third floor, the door of an apartment opened and a man ran out. The man was short but stocky, his face twisted with a combination of rage, hate, and fear. The man saw Mike Shayne.

Shayne and the man fired at the same instant. The man's bullet knocked splinters from the wall just over Shayne's shoulder. Shayne, too, missed. Before he could fire again, the man ran along the landing and down the stairs toward the street.

Shayne hurled down to the third floor leading, turned, and pounded after the man who had shot at him. The man, looking back in panic, fired once more. Shayne ducked. Before he could fire again, the man ran full into the grip of the waiting Ed Landers.

Below, Landers dropped the startled gunman with a single choice punch to the belly. Shayne watched for a second to be sure. He saw Landers pick up the gun of the fallen gunman, and turn to look up. Shayne turned back and ran into the room the gunman had left.

It was a small, shabby room. It was neat but almost bare. There was a narrow studio couch for a bed, two wooden chairs of the kind you could buy at any second-hand store for a few dollars, a table of

the same kind, a small single hot-plate, and a dilapidated chest-of-drawers. All clean, and neat, and terribly barren.

On the floor an old man with grey hair lay in a pool of blood.

The man saw Shayne and managed a smile. He struggled to a sitting position against the wall.

Shayne looked at him. The man wore a good, neat grey pin-stripe suit that had cost more than the whole room, a lot more. The man's shoes were shined. Good shoes. The bloody white shirt was a good shirt.

"Hello, Mr. Shayne," the man said.

"Don't talk," Shayne said. He bent down and examined the man's wounds. He stood up. The man was lucky to have lived until now. There was nothing Shayne could do. He turned and looked for a telephone. There was none.

Ed Landers stood in the door, holding his prisoner with one hand, the other hand holding his gun. The old man on the floor nodded.

"Good evening, Mr. Landers."

"Hello, Berce," Landers said.

The old man, Bercy J. James, or James J. Bercy, Sr., looked at the gunman who had shot him. Then the old man smiled.

"You got him. Good. He'll die, won't he? For shooting—me. Good! That is all of them!"

The gunman struggled as if he wanted still to get at the old man.

"McGrath," the old man said. "He's the last. All of them."

Paul McGrath, the gunman, began to swear. "You old—"

Landers twisted McGrath's arm. The gunman screamed. Mike Shayne went out to find a telephone.

An hour later, Paul McGrath taken away by his men, Lieutenant Naudes of the New York police stood with Shayne and Landers and looked down at the old man who still sat against the wall, still alive.

The ambulance crew stood there with their stretcher, but the old man waved them away.

"No, what good would it do?" the old man, Bercy, said. "I don't mind now. I got them all, didn't I? I knew Mr. Shayne would get them. He never fails, Mr. Shayne

doesn't. I knew, I checked. Mr. Shayne would get them all."

The old man gasped for breath. Shayne leaned down. The old man smiled at him.

"It was me, not the company. You sent them all to rob Inter-Continental clients in Miami so I would get after them?"

The old man smiled. "A long time, I watched. You always caught them! One mistake, that was all he made. One mistake! And he died. He was a good boy. I worked hard, educated him. I got him the job, a new name so he would not be held back by a janitor father.

"He was foolish. One little mistake. But them! They were criminals! They got to him, in that prison! He was no match for them. How could he be? They made him try to escape and then they left him to be killed! All of them! They told!"

The old man laughed, coughed, the blood welling up in his throat. "They told, and I told! They led him into that prison break and left him to die! One mistake! He was a good boy, a good boy. I worked —so hard!"

Landers stared down. "You waited until they all got out, then you set up the robberies?"

The old man laughed, a horrible, whispering laugh. "They were so greedy! I learned the name of Porter from the company files, and the names of the policy holders. Mr. Shayne never let them get away. I saved, many years. I had the twenty-five thousand dollars; it was enough. I went to Florida."

The old man coughed again. "I could have waited, but I had to see! You might have made a deal. No, I had to see. So I tipped Mr. Shayne. I saw him kill Polk! I was glad! They killed my—boy. One mistake and my boy is dead. They let him die!"

Shayne looked at the old man, half in pity and half in contempt.

"So you decided to make me your executioner," Shayne said.

The old man shrugged. "You never failed. I studied the files. He was dead, my boy. He hated prison. He could not stand prison. And they were all alive, free! No, I made sure they would not live when he was dead, be free when he was not free. Dead or prison, it did not matter."

The old man laughed again. "They were so easy to trap. Greedy, filthy fools!"

The old man's voice rose almost to a scream. Then he began to cough, stared up once, smiled, and fell over in a pool of sudden blood. He was dead.

* * *

IN THE high office of Ed Landers, Shayne stood staring out the window at the great city. Landers was completing his report. Mike Shayne sighed.

"He just couldn't wait, so he tipped me. He never realized that I might smell something wrong," Shayne said.

Landers shrugged. "How could he? He didn't know about averages and MOs. He just knew you always caught them. I suppose it's a compliment to you, Mike."

Shayne said nothing. After a time the red-head turned from the window.

"If the kid had only been worth it," Landers said. "The kid was a no-good punk. McGrath says they all knew the break had been tipped, but the kid was so arrogant he figured he could make it anyway. You know, I wonder who did tip that break?"

Shayne sighed again. "I don't suppose we'll ever know."

"No," Landers said. "He made it work, didn't he? He got them all."

"Yeah, he made it work. He used me, and you, and the police to get his revenge," Shayne said. The red-head sat down and lighted a cigarette. "This is one case that won't ever taste good."

"We got him, too, Mike. At least, you did," Landers said.

Shayne smoked. "Yeah, that makes it all right. Like hell it does. Nothing makes this one all right."

Landers said nothing. The insurance detective went back to his report. Mike Shayne smoked and stared out the window.

Next Month's New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

KICK OF DEATH

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Death was in the air. For somewhere in the Miami night a mixed-up kid lay murdered, and those who knew the score were not talking. The smell of fear had a city in its clutches, as Mike Shayne took on his strangest, most deadly assignment. Somewhere in those night-blanketed streets of evil he must track down and destroy a killer whom hundreds swore didn't exist—and catch up with a dead boy who still went to school!

Trapped in a Singapore hell dive, a secret agent named Welsh was waiting for me. And, looking down that dark street, I remembered: "You got one chance in four of coming back."

ASSIGNMENT —SINGAPORE

by ALDEN H. NORTON

WHEN THE managing editor of the *Globe,* who was in the know from the beginning, sent me to Singapore to do a series of stories on night life, sin and other quaint old Eastern habits, he was of course acting for my real boss, who shall be nameless. My real boss happens to be head of one of Uncle Sam's most important undercover departments. I guess I can say that much.

In short, I'm not really Jackson Seltzer Gray. I never wrote a book in my life, either. I happen to be a Federal agent and a damned good one, assigned to narcotics control. But don't ask my name, unless you want to be told another fabrication.

The real Jackson Gray never met me. But according to the Pentagon I look enough like him to get by for a time in Singapore.

Anyway, my boss wanted to get me into the native quarter. My boss, I may add, usually got what he wanted.

I remember the day the assignment was given to me.

I said, "Singapore! It might be fun, at that. I've never been there and Tit Fung's boys may not spot me in a hurry."

My boss said, "That's the general idea. They'll tab you for an eager-beaver reporter on a feature assignment. Dumb as hell, with an eye for any slit skirt that swishes by."

He grinned sardonically. "You won't have to put on much of an act," he said. "Stay the way you are. You're a natural."

My boss, it may be noted, is ever ready with the kind word.

I said, "The police. Or the local narcotics bureau. Are they in the know?"

My boss said, "We don't trust anybody down there too much right now. We lost Dave Turner last month, you know. There's a leak somewhere. It seems to come from America direct to someone planted in the Singapore constabulary. They've hushed up two big scandals that reach high up into top brass. Opium and heroin are big business. Big enough to corrupt some important people."

He lit an expensive cigar. He didn't offer me one.

He said gloomily, "You'll do a better job than the last guy; I feel sure of that. Actually, all you have to do is locate a chap named Welsh. He has a red heart tattooed on his chest. He's somewhere in Singapore's native quarter and he's in real trouble. He has vital information we need and he can't get it out.

"He doesn't dare go to the police, because if he talks to the wrong man he's dead. He'll be looking for a young writer named Gray. You're it."

I said suspiciously, "How did you lose the last man?"

My boss grunted.

"By getting himself killed," he said sourly.

I didn't sleep any too well on the plane.

IN SINGAPORE, I finally got permission to go out on patrol with one of Police Secretary Peter Spencer's men.

It wasn't easy, even though Peter Spencer knew who I really was and what I was after. They were very jittery down there, after what had happened to Dave Turner. I'm told they could only recognize his body by one fingerprint. The rest of the torso was quite a mess.

Inspector Charles Evans, who had been assigned to me, looked downright mutinous about the whole thing when I was turned over to him. Of course, he wasn't in the know. He just had been told I was looking for a guy named Welsh for a story.

He shook his head.

"I don't like this," he said. "You're a blasted bloody nuisance, you know. You're just making trouble for me, maybe yourself." His eyes were wary, a little scared. He was quite young.

"You'd have about one chance in four of coming out of this district in one piece if I wasn't with you," he said. "It's the toughest spot in the world."

He was right, of course. Ever since the war Singapore, never too savory, has become one of the

most depraved cesspools in the world. They're working to clean it up, but up to now with no great success.

Make no mistake about it, these police laddies know their business. They're well trained, brave as all get-out, and they know how to handle the scum they deal with.

The trouble is, they're too few and too late—and too English. And they're ground up in the coils of a crime machine that would make Murder Incorporated look like a Sunday School.

We were going down the Bugis Street side of the New Plaza Cafe. A horrible old harridan came sidling up, with her hand out. When she saw who my companion was she stayed there, standing straddle-legged, facing us, like some obscene harpy.

I automatically fumbled in my pocket and Evans said, "None of that, now!"

She spat red betel juice and it splashed against my shoe. Her lips were thin gates of all the evil in the world. In a curious singsong monotone she cursed us. Let our seed be sparse and scorned by women. May the bones of my mother rot in dishonor.

She knew all the words. She spoke in an oddly pure mission school English which made what she said all the more hair raising.

Having at last done with the hated police, she went away, mouthing foul things at the night.

I felt a little ill. New York was nothing like this, even though it was bad enough.

The fog was curling in from the river. Grey threads closing over the darkness, making it yet more dark. Inspector Evans shrugged sourly. "It's going to be a foul night for it, Yank. You asked for it."

We went into the New Plaza Cafe.

It looked like a slighty dirtier Eighth Avenue bar in Manhattan's forties, but it smelled worse. A British sailor, stoned to the eyeballs, was fumbling at the blouse of a giggling harpy who was old enough to be his mother. Some well-dressed Chinese, impervious to the rest of the world, were playing fantan at a corner table.

Somewhere deep inside a smoke wreathed room a band was playing lugubriously. Dixieland; very bad and very much off-key. And everywhere there were girls.

They were many, of varying color and all kinds of shapes. But they were all chippies. You could see their eyes get wary when they saw Evans.

Charley said drily, "You can get six dances—*and* one of these tarts —for an American dollar."

The Malayan barboy pushed a bottle out on the bar. It was Haig and Haig pinch and the seal was unbroken.

My guide said, "Take a spot, if you like. I'll fill you in on our patrol. Lee here's an old chum. He

won't poison you—not while I'm with you."

I took three fingers, and another. I drank it neat. I was uncomfortably conscious of hard, predatory eyes watching, wondering if I had anything worth taking. It was a little like being measured for a coffin.

While I drank, Evans told me a little about his district.

It was nightmare stuff. In six square blocks—the Bugis Street compound—the offical police files had listed twenty-eight murders, one hundred-eleven holdups and over two hundred thefts. And God knows how many other poor beggars had died unknown and unclassified.

As he talked, always around us was the music, wailing, offkey, like a cracked record. They never stop playing, twenty-four hours a day. They have three bands, each a little shoddier, a little more hopeless than the one before. They get paid in tips and opium, which doesn't help them keep in time.

The smell of unwashed bodies was getting a bit overwhelming. I must have looked a little green. Charley said, "Well, you asked for it, you know. Come on along, if you like."

Outside, the fog had thickened. The sprawling darkness was an evil curtain, blotting out the world. I could hardly see across the narrow street. The lights along the Bugis compound, never bright, were thin and watery against the dark.

We had walked perhaps a block when I heard a girl cry out, a cry that was so savagely cut off that the silence which followed was even worse to bear.

Charley Evans cursed wearily. "A fine ruddy night for it," he said wearily. "What is it? Maybe one of your sailors beating up some wench. Maybe a tong murder. We average a hundred a month, you know. Come on."

I followed him down a noisome alley, strewn with filth and the human sewage of generations. There was a crowd gathered around something sprawled on the ground. When they saw us, they melted silently into the blackness.

It was a girl. She couldn't have been more than thirteen, but she wore the red shoes and high heels which are the trademark of a Singapore 'joy girl'. Her neck was twisted grotesquely awry. It was easy to see why her scream had been choked off so suddenly. The chap who had broken her neck must have had hands like mallets.

Charley's flashlight traveled down across the girl's limp body, to her hand. He swore softly and nudged me. I leaned down to look.

Her fingers were bleeding. One of them was obviously broken.

"She was foolish enough to wear a ring," he said grimly. "Maybe a drunken sailor had given it to her. Probably it wasn't worth five

Straits dollars. But it was enough to get her killed. Life is cheap on this street."

I nodded, trying not to look sick.

I said, "I'm supposed to look up this chap Welsh, you know. Name mean anything to you?"

Charley said, "Sounds a chord. But right now I've got more pressing things to do. I've got to fill out papers and round up witnesses, that sort of thing. Now—" He frowned— "you'll be a confounded nuisance here right now. They'll never talk while a strange Yank is around. I'll try to find out about Welsh. In the meantime, you go back to the New Plaza, like a good chap, and wait there until I come to pick you up. Walk in the middle of the street and keep your blasted nose clean. Hear?"

Have you ever leaned over the side of a tall building, feeling the deadly draw of it, wondering what would happen if you leaned a little more forward, forward . . .

The doctors have a name for it. The death curiosity. You don't want to die. You just want to see a little bit what it would be like. And before you can scream once you're a dead duck. You can't walk back upstairs once you've taken the long drop.

So that was me, walking down the middle of the street, like a prudent gent should. I could even see the lights of the New Plaza, hazy in the fog, maybe three more blocks down the alley, where it joined Bugis Street.

And then I saw this girl's hips undulate, going down yet another alley, sharply to my right. I could see a flickering neon sign over a tavern right near her.

Hell, I know what a girl looks like, with or without that slit skirt. But the darkness, and the warm night, and the nice way she moved it around when she walked . . .

I thought, what the devil, I'm practically back into civilization. Anyway, they wouldn't dare touch a friend of Charley's. I'll just mosey down here a few yards or so, and see if a guy named Welsh was in that joint.

That was nearly my last living thought, as it happened.

They were on me like animals, clawing and pressing, bearing me down into the wet filth. I opened my mouth to yell and some fool had a stinking sleeve ground between my jaws, almost tearing my head off.

I saw the glint of a kris waving above me and I closed my eyes, not wanting to see Death when it came. And then on top of me, a man screamed shrilly and kicked and jerked, and suddenly I was free.

A voice said, "This way, matey. Get a leg up before you get really hurt."

It was a good Yorkshire voice and it came from a giant of a man who had a red knife in his hands. He pulled me into the darkness and I followed him without thought. He had saved my life and he had injured, perhaps killed a man to do so. I felt, without knowing why, that this was a man to ride the river with.

We went down a narrow space between two hovels, wheeled sharply as my rescuer almost jerked my arm from its shoulder socket. A dimly lit door crack came out of the fog. With a giant blow of his fist the man in front of me pushed the door open and I stumbled inside.

The door slammed behind us, and the noise of the street was wiped away like a curtain. I stared, still stunned, at what I saw.

It was an opium den, obviously. It had the curious macabre resemblance to an overloaded dormitory —macabre because they who lay on the tiered bunks were not students, but very sick men. Beside me, so close that I tripped over one of them, two middle-aged Chinese were writhing on the floor, their mouths opening convulsively in something between a yawn and a moan.

They were skeletons which still, in some way, lived on. They were obviously in the final stages of addiction and quite literally dying for a fix.

One of them saw the big blond man and made a little yelping sound.

"'Arry *tuan,*" he supplicated. "'Arry pay." His yellow teeth bared and a claw of a hand groped for my companion's sleeve.

He shook the hands off.

"Stow it, you bastard," he said without anger.

An attendant came over with a pot and pipes and the two derelicts, without asking or giving thanks, clawed for lamps for their opium pipes and lit them. Almost at once all desire, all hunger went from their eyes and they were back among the living dead, lost to everything except their need and the dreams it would bring them.

A handful of girls were there. They were very young, and apparently not addicts. One of them, face impassive, busied herself with the dreadful task of putting some kind of salve on the awful sores which nearly all the men sported.

My companion said, "Starvation blossoms, matey. When you get it that bad you don't eat no more. You don't want nothing in this life. Women, money, nothing. Nothing

but that little bubbling pill for your pipe, so you can go back out of the lousy world."

He took a sucking drag from the pipe he had and turned to me. His face was strong and almost young, but he had the telltale yellow mark of the addict in his eye whites.

"Arry Tomkins, late of Her Majesty's constabulary," he said. He smiled grimly. "I liked my work," he said. "But I found something I liked better. This."

What the hell can you say?

I managed, "I hope you can—get me back to the New Plaza. I promised to meet a—"

He said roughly, "Later, lad. After a pipe or two I'll be on me way, and you can come with me. Nobody down here dares lay a hand on Late Inspector Tomkins, eh, you foul, buggy vermin?"

He roared loudly and they fawned, smiling evilly back at the mad *tuan* who was their brother and their master.

Harry said, "The sanctimonious beggars tore the chevrons off me uniform and booted me out of the service. But they're not above payin' out good British money for the right kind of information. I been told, for instance, a little commie tong killer may drop in here tonight. We'll just wait a bit and see."

He sucked at his pipe. The sadness of ages was in his good yeoman's eyes. He was still too strong, too vital, to fall into a stupor from the drug. But it made him talk a little more, slow and dead, as though he was talking to a shade and not to me.

"It ain't nothing like the old days," he said. "Everything's changed since the war."

He took a deep breath.

"It's changed, the bloody East," he said. "It changed the day the Japs frog-legged the white masters, the *tuans,* down Singapore's main road to Changi gaol, pricking them in the backsides with their bayonets, letting the Chinese hear how a white man can cry when a yellow man pricks his backside."

He snorted.

"Oh, they welcomed us back after the peace, the mangy beggars. After Tojo, they'd settle for a white *tuan* for God. Even if he still wouldn't let you relieve yourself in the lavatory of his club, or sit beside him on a train, or stay at his hotel. But it will never be the same again.

"The commies are plenty strong with the young ones. They figure they got nothing to lose. Some young men and girlies, even if they happen to be yellow, don't figure they want to end their days like—this.

He said, in that curiously dreamlike voice, "There's a girl, maybe eight or nine. She lives with her father in a shack near the Old School Tailor, across the street from the Good Luck Cabaret."

He spat.

"She were a dearie of a baby," he said. "I used to watch her sittin' under the dragon's blood tree in front of her door, looking at the world with those big black eyes that were as old as the ages."

The sound of his pipe, bubbling, was like a dirge.

"She screams every night now," he said. "You know why? They're training her to be a prostitute—joy girl to you. A good one makes a living wage around here, and her father figures it's never too soon to start. The blasted swine.

"The gangs boss this city," he went on. "The Apache Boys. The Ang Bin Huat Society. Tit Fung and his bully boys. And the commies, they boss both the tongs and the boy gangs. Some day, laddy, they'll stop plundering each other long enough to join forces to take care of the white man." He shrugged. "You better be back safe in New York when that day comes. It ain't going to be pretty."

I shivered. The room seemed colder. The sickish sweet smell of the poppy was in my brain. I just had to do a good job on this assignment. But how?

In a far corner of the room, deep in the murk, a girl got up suddenly and jabbered something to an attendant, who knelt briefly over a stinking bundle of rags.

After a quick examination he dragged it, and the thing that had been inside it, out of the room. Its head bumped hollowly along the serrated floor as it was pulled across the threshold and down the steps.

Harry shrugged. "They die every day," he said. "The beggar's no worse off."

He got up. The bulk of him seemed to fill the room. He flung a few coins on the floor and they scrabbled for them, slavering with the lust of what a coin could bring them. Harry said, "Out with you now, Yank," and pushed me, not ungently, out the doorway.

HE SHOULD have known better. I guess the second pipe had dulled him. A white man in that alley couldn't afford to be dull. Not and live.

I saw them before he did. Something moving in the shadows, a whisper choked off. I kept my face straight ahead, but I could see what it was and I caught the picture in an instant. The rags moving toward us, out of the blackness, were the same ones I had seen inside, on the supposed dead man. And beside him, very much alive, were two Chinese in American business suits, obviously tong boys out for no good.

It all fitted. An informer against an informer. Very oriental and thoroughly deadly.

It all happened too fast after that for conscious thought. I heard Harry catch his breath, swear, just as the knife *thoped* into his shoulder, with the sound of a cleaver hit-

ting meat. I like to think that the shove I gave him saved his jugular. Harry groaned, lurched, and I—

I'm no hero, even if I am a government agent. I bleated thin scrabbly cries for help into an alien night. I say it with some shame, but I did. One of the tong men moved in on me and I kicked him where it had to hurt, even while a police whistle shrilled up the street, where I had left Inspector Evans.

They still came on. The fake dead man had wrestled Harry down to the street, trying to pound his head into the stones. The man I had kicked lay groaning in the street, holding his vitals, and I remember grinning, liking it, just as the other man shot me in the shoulder. It was a hurried shot. It hit me like a club and spun me around, but I threw myself at the gun and it flew into the street.

The tong man was little more than a boy, and very scared. He'd heard the police whistle too. I tried to hold him, but the pain in my shoulder was too much and my eyes had trouble in focussing.

I saw the olive drab shorts come running around the corner, and suddenly it seemed important that I explain to Charlie Evans why I had disobeyed his orders.

I opened my mouth to do so and suddenly everything went black, and the world went away.

A voice from a great distance said, "Open yer kisser, Yank. It's good scotch."

That kind of language any man understands. The feel of it was good in my throat. The fire of it put the gristle back in my joints and I could see again.

We were back in the police barracks. A very red-faced superintendent was biting his moustache angrily and making apoplectic noises.

Evans said, "He disobeyed my orders, sir. Nearly got us all killed."

Behind him a deep voice said, "He also saved my blasted neck, sir. I was a goner without the Yank's help."

My eyes widened. It was Harry, the Yorkshire renegade. He had a bandage on his shoulder. But he was wearing the olive of the Singapore constabulary. On him it looked mighty natural, somehow.

He said," Sorry to lead you down the garden path, yunker."

Evans said, "Shake hands with Special Investigator Welsh, lad. On leave from Scotland Yard, assigned to narcotics control. He was looking for you. I gave him a good description of you. He came in right after you left with Evans."

The fuzzy vagueness had whipped out of the big Yorkshireman's voice and he spoke crisply and strong, every inch the policeman.

"We got the man we wanted," he said. "He's the gent you kicked. By the time he stops groaning and starts talking we'll know a lot more

about Tit Fung's nice little death house down the alley. As for you, though—"

As if by accident, adjusting the bandage on his shoulder, he half opened his tunic, half facing around so only I could see. He didn't have to. I knew what was there—the little red heart, tattooed on his chest, just about where a lady would wear a brassiere.

I said, "Maybe we could stand a drink. I think we have a few things to say to each other."

We did.

Later, about three scotches and sodas later, the man called Welsh said, "That's it, Yank. I'm going back to London, of course. My head wouldn't be worth one Hanoi dollar right now in this town."

We did a goodly bit of business over those drinks. The man named Welsh—for that wasn't his real name either—had been a real busy fellow. A high official in the Singapore Constabulary blew his head off that night, presumably because of "poor health." And an ex-Chamber of Commerce president and pillar of the church in a certain mid Western city back in the States found it necessary to leave for parts unknown. Not to mention the Tit Fung emissary—he was the taller of the two well dressed Chinese we had tangled with in the alley. They found him in the harbor a day or so later. Tit Fung is very generous with his hired help. But he doesn't like failures.

I asked him, "How the hell do you pull that bluff of being an addict? You had me fooled."

He grinned bleakly. "You weren't fooled, sonny. That's another reason I'm going to Blighty. In this business, you do a job all the way, or you end up dead. You don't think I could fool those opium den boys, do you? I'm hooked, little man. I only hope they can straighten me out back in England."

I thought, when they're passing out purple hearts, this poor blighter could qualify near the top of the list.

He sighed, said, "As for you—"

I said, "Don't even tell me. Just give me another quick shot, some codeine for this shoulder and a one-way ticket back to Kennedy."

Fourteen hours later and 1400 feet up, I looked down over the Straits from the plane. Below me was Singapore, sprawled like a beautiful harlot athwart the glamorous East. The gateway to the Orient. Jasmine nights of love and all that sort of thing.

The feel of the Paris edition of the *Tribune,* a week old, was good in my hands. And the English stewardess looked solid and not seductive and somehow wonderful.

They could rave about the East forever, as far as I was concerned.

Me, I'd seen it naked, at night. And they could bloody well keep it.

Until the next assignment, of course.

To him, any woman was a toy for a night. To her, the right man was hers alone, forever. I could see her suffer at his hands, and suddenly I couldn't stand the sight. It was then I remembered the gun.

DEAR ALICE

by CLAYTON MATTHEWS

I KNEW Darrel Tate three years before either of us met Nora. No, it was not a triangle. To begin with, Darrel was a typical bachelor, although that might sound somewhat strange said about a man not yet thirty.

Yet he phrased it quite well, I think, shortly after we met. "Why should I get married, Martin? I have all the dolls I want. I don't dig this domesticity bit. Not yet anyway. Maybe never."

This may sound egotistical. It was not. It was simply a statement of fact.

He was too much in love with himself to ever surrender any part of that self to one woman.

Not that he was in the least offensive about it. It was even a part of his charm.

And he was charming beyond question. He possessed the sculptured physique of an Adonis. He was, to employ a phrase now out-

of-date, a heartbreaker as far as women were concerned.

Some people might wonder how I, a mere male, can be so positive about Darrel's ability to charm women. The explanation is simple. I write a column of advice to the lovesick, *Dear Alice*. At the time I met Darrel I had been writing it for five years. I believe that qualifies me. Each year I receive thousands of letters pleading for advice on matters of the heart. It is true some of the letters are from men, but they are in the minority.

My doing the column started more or less by accident. Briefly, the female who wrote a syndicated column for the lovesick developed definite paranoia and her ravings brought the paper dangerously close to a lawsuit, so her column was dropped.

I was selected as a fill-in. I later learned it was done in jest by the jovial city editor. The joke was on him. My column caught on. The only logical explanation I can offer is my honesty.

If some poor woman was afflicted by a cretin who snored, drank beer before the idiot box in his undershirt, et cetera, I told her the truth as I saw it. I advised her to divorce him. I did not tell her, as my predecessor would have done, to bear up, that matrimony is holy, marriage vows are taken for better or worse, et cetera.

Within three years my column was syndicated in newspapers across the country. By that time I was working at home. Needless to say, only a very small number of people knew that Dear Alice was not Dear Alice at all, but Martin French, a male Caucasion of thirty-five.

The first thing that drew me to Darrel was the fact that he did not laugh when I told him I was Dear Alice. He shrugged and said, "You make a buck your way; I'll make mine my way."

Darrel had been working in the sports department of the paper for close to a year the day I met him. Later, I pieced together his history. He had been a three-letter athlete in high school and college and had played three years of professional football before going to work for the paper.

I met him in the corridor outside the sports department, met him literally by accident. I rarely ever visited the paper, usually sending my copy down by messenger. But I was facing a deadline on this particular day and had delivered it myself. I was just leaving, head down in thought, when I bumped into Darrel.

I glanced up with a frown that soon dissipated before the most engaging grin I had ever encountered.

"I'm sorry, guy," he said. "I guess I just wasn't looking."

It was my fault, of course, but he would not hear of it.

Before I knew what was hap-

pening, I was taken in tow by this blond young giant with the blazing blue eyes. "I was just going out for lunch. I'll buy you a sandwich, a beer, a belt—" He glanced at me again. "On second thought, you look like a martini-for-lunch type to me."

Coming from anyone else this would have offended me. As it happened, he was correct: I do like an occasional martini for lunch.

That was the beginning of it. Those three years were an enjoyable period of my life. To be frank, I had become something of a recluse. Being able to work at home, I spent most of my time there. After my daily column was done, I would read or work on my play by the hour.

Darrel pulled me out of that shell. I had not attended an athletic event since my college days. Darrel had free passes to all important sporting events. And somehow he always managed to find two beautiful women. Often Darrel had to work the games and left me with the women while he was in the press box.

After he had turned in his copy, we went "out on the town." Darrel knew everybody and was familiar with all the nightspots. We would roister until the small hours, then go our separate ways.

Darrel never asked me if I took my date home with me. The first few times I did not, but I soon overcame my reservations. As I said previously, I enjoyed myself.

Cooking is a hobby of mine. After I got to know Darrel better, I would occasionally cook dinner for all of us in my apartment.

I do not wish to give the impression that Darrel had a different girl every night. Such was not the case. I usually did; I preferred it that way, since none held more than a passing interest for me.

However, Darrel would escort the same girl for weeks, sometimes months. Then one night there would be a new face.

The first time this happened I questioned him about it. "Things get a little sticky, Martin. She starts to believe she owns me. When that happens, it's time to change partners."

"One day you'll break some girl's heart," I said somewhat more sharply than I had intended.

He glanced at me quizzically. "Break some girl's heart? Aw, come on, Martin! You've got me confused with those kooks who write in to you for advice."

From his expression, I must have turned red. I suppose I did sound like a fatuous ass. With a column such as mine, dealing daily with soap opera problems, I tend to become like an actor who finds it difficult to step out of character once a stage performance is over.

One afternoon, three years after meeting him, I encountered Darrel once more in the corridor outside

the sports department. This time he was in a state of agitation.

"Martin, you've got to help me! I have a date to meet a girl at the ball game at Dodger Stadium this evening. Now I learn I have to cover the game, damn it. Somebody came down sick. The girl has her ticket already. She'll be expecting me. Be a good guy and take my ticket, will you? Tell her I can't make it. Will you do that? I'd appreciate it all to hell."

I looked at him with some amazement. "I don't recall ever seeing you in such a state over a girl, Darrel. It has to be someone new. Is it also someone special?"

He changed color, which increased my amazement. Now I was curious. Now I knew I had to go.

The girl was Nora. Nora Kenmore.

To say that she was lovely would be understating the case. Green eyes slightly aslant, short chestnut hair, narrow face solemn one moment and laughing the next, slight and slender, with a way of walking suggestive of a wood nymph.

"I'm Martin French. Darrel couldn't come. He has to cover the game. He sent me instead."

"Hi, Martin," she said gravely. "Since Darrel couldn't come, I'm glad he sent you instead."

I studied her face for signs of mockery, but I could detect none.

"I'm starved, Martin. Would you get me a hot dog, everything on it?"

I bought her three dogs, two soft drinks and one frozen malt before the game was over. To my complete amazement I even ate a hot dog myself; usually they revolt me.

During all those times with Darrel at various sporting events, I had never developed more than a mild interest in any sport. Nora was a rabid Dodger fan. She knew the batting averages of every player. Darrel had never bothered to instruct me in the finer points of baseball.

During that first night with Nora, my knowledge of the game was broadened considerably. At first she thought it both terrible and terribly amusing that I should be so ignorant; then she took great delight in teaching me.

After the game, which the Dodgers won, to Nora's crowing delight, I invited her to a midnight supper. I doubted she would accept after all she had eaten during the game, yet she accepted without hesitation.

I took her to the Tower Restaurant in the Occidental Building. We got a table by the window with a fabulous view. We had two martinis before supper. I learned quite a bit about her. I listened, absorbed in the quick-silver play of expression on her features, as she chatted away.

She was a Kelly girl. This gave her a great deal of free time, time she devoted to trying to become an actress. She had done bit parts in a number of little theaters around Los Angeles and had had a few

minor television roles. But her chief interest was the stage.

I wanted to tell her of my own interest in the theater, but caution held me back. I decided to wait. I was only a stand-in for Darrel. Tomorrow night or the next or the next after that, she would be going out with him.

She lived in a new apartment building off Wilshire. In front of her building I told the cab driver to wait, and I walked her to the entrance. We paused there in a spill of light, and she turned a solemn face up to me.

"I had a nice evening, Martin."

"And I also. I'll tell Darrel or perhaps you'll see him first? Perhaps you'll tell him I was an adequate stand-in?

"Darrel? Oh, yes, I'll tell him. Good night, Martin."

She touched my check with just the tips of her fingers, turned away with a swirl of skirt and disappeared into the building.

I returned to the cab. The ride home I took in bemused thought. She was a lovely girl, Nora, a fine person, charming company. Darrel could consider himself fortunate. I could only hope she was not the one whose heart he would break. She seemed too intelligent to get that deeply involved, but I knew that was no criterion. The letters I receive daily points up the fact that intelligence has little to do with matters of the emotions.

Every time I saw Darrel during the next few weeks he was with Nora. The first few times he brought a girl along for me. Then, one evening, my date came down with a bad cold. Both Darrel and Nora insisted that I come along anyway. Reluctantly I did. And we had a marvelous time.

As though by unspoken agreement, we made it a threesome after that. Surprisingly enough, there was no awkwardness about it, and Darrel seemed to have no objections. We did have fun together, the three of us, and it was usually only one evening a week, or a weekend day. I knew, of course, that Darrel was seeing Nora other evenings, so he lost nothing.

I felt some concern for Nora. I feared she would be hurt in the end by her association with Darrel. Certainly she did not seem his type. She was subject to strange moods, alternating between gay and somber ones. She could be intellectually stimulating and then take a child's delight in games a moment later. And then she could plunge without warning into a mood of depression. On these occasions she usually cut the evening short and went home.

I finally invited them to dinner in my apartment. I live in an older apartment building in West Hollywood. It is quite large with three bedrooms, one of which I had converted into a study where I work. It is done mostly in dark woods, with narrow windows and a huge,

blackened fireplace with a portrait of my mother over the mantelpiece. It had been soundproofed in recent years, and I had close to absolute privacy.

Before Darrel and Nora came, I locked up all evidence of my connection with the column. Naturally Nora knew I worked for the paper. To all her inquiries, which were not many, I was purposely vague. I had told her I was connected with the drama department. This was not an outright falsehood.

I did write a piece on the theater occasionally. Since my value to the paper had increased considerably, they were happy to publish my rare pieces. Perhaps this could be considered a gentle form of blackmail, but I could not care less.

Nora seemed to accept my explanation without question.

I had martinis waiting when they arrived. I took Nora on a tour of the apartment. My study is lined with books, the majority on the theater, volumes of plays, et cetera.

Nora was enchanted. "I've never seen so many plays, Martin! You must have about every play written!"

Darrel said, "Martin has written a couple of plays, Nora. I'll bet you didn't know that."

"No, I didn't." She turned to me with a little-girl clap of hands. "May I read one? May I, Martin?"

I glanced at Darrel in some annoyance, puzzled as to his reasons for telling her. And I was positive

I had detected a note of malice in his voice. I had told him of my play-writing in confidence. Now I could not avoid showing Nora one of my plays without seeming churlish.

I gave her a copy of the last one I had finished. It had never been submitted to a producer. I had grown wary of repeated rebuffs. To my dismay, Nora kicked off her shoes, curled up in a big leather chair with my play and her drink. I had expected her to take it home with her. I knew how honest she was, and I was not sure I wanted her candid opinion voiced in front of Darrel.

I was busy for close to an hour putting the finishing touches to the dinner, popping in and out of the study to check on their drinks. Darrel drank rather heavily, Nora hardly at all. She was a fast reader. I did not realize she had finished the play until we were nearly through dinner. She had been thoughtful, very uncommunicative, speaking only a few times to compliment me on the excellence of the

dinner. It was one of my better culinary efforts.

Suddenly Nora said, "I've been thinking about your play, Martin. It's penetrating. It has flashes of mordant wit that reminds one of Oscar Wilde, even Shaw. But it has an old-fashioned quality. The love affair between the boy and the girl, for instance, is tender, very touching, but it has a flavor of crinoline and old lace."

"As the producers say, I'm out of touch with today's audience."

"Something like that, yes."

"You mean I don't wallow in depraved sex, violence and obscenities?"

"Wallow isn't quite the word, Martin. A playwright should be a mirror of his time."

"I refuse to mirror filth!"

"Filth? I notice you have a copy of every play Shakespeare wrote. Do you think he was a great playwright?"

I recognized the trap. I said stiffly, "Only a fool would argue otherwise."

"Well then." She spread her hands expressively. "William Shakespeare employed violence, sex, blood and guts to great effect."

Abruptly I pushed away from the table. "If you will excuse me, please."

I was standing before the fireplace when they came out of the dining room a few minutes later.

Nora came directly to me. "Martin, I'm sorry—"

I was shaking my head. "No, no, I'm the one to beg forgiveness. It's just that—You see, I know that everything you say is true, Nora. I suppose that's why it bothers me."

"There are other things in the world beside the theater, Martin," she said gently. Her glance moved up to the portrait. "Your mother?"

I looked up. "Yes. She was a lady. One of the last, I sometimes think."

"And your father?"

"I never knew him. He died when I was quite small."

They left very soon after that. Later, I remembered that Darrel had been in a strange mood all evening, drinking more than usual and saying less than was normal for him. I suppose I was to blame. I had spoiled the whole evening for us.

A few evenings later I called on Darrel. It was early, but the light in his apartment told me that he was spending a rare evening at home. It was not until I had pressed the doorbell that it occurred to me he might not be alone. If Nora was with him, it could be a very embarassing moment for everybody concerned.

I never did find out if Nora or anyone else was in the apartment. If Nora was there, she remained behind the closed bedroom door, and that seemed wholly unlike Nora.

Darrel was in a purple smoking jacket that struck me as being gar-

ish in contrast to his blondeness. There was a drink in his hand, and his face was flushed.

I came right to the point. "Darrel, some time ago we were discussing what might happen one day to one of—these women of yours. The others didn't matter, not really. But I'm quite fond of Nora—"

"Quite fond of her, are you?" He canted his head to one side, eyes narrowing.

I dectected a note of mockery in his voice, but I went doggedly ahead. "Yes, I am, and I don't wish to see her hurt."

"Is that right?"

For a moment I had the impression he was going to laugh in my face. Then he half-turned away and finished his drink with a toss of his head. His features, when he turned to me again, were even more flushed.

"You know what you remind me of sometimes, Martin? A prissy old maid! Keep your nose out of my affairs! When I want your advice, I'll ask for it!"

I could only stare at him in astonishment. I had never seen him like this. I said coldly, "There's no need to be nasty. I am only saying this for your own good and Nora's. I'm sure you wouldn't wish to see her—"

"And for your own good, Martin, you'd better leave. Or you'll see just how nasty I can be." He took a threatening step toward me.

I retreated with as much dignity as possible under the circumstances. Belatedly I realized he had had too much to drink and could conceivably have struck me. My leaving thus saved us both embarrassment.

But I was positive that, taking into consideration his state of intoxication, I had gotten my point across.

I was positive until the first letter came a week later.

All letters to the column are addressed to Dear Alice in care of the paper, and then forwarded to me.

This particular letter was buried in a stack of others, and I scanned it quickly until the signature brought me up short.

It was from Nora!

I read it again:

Dear Alice: I am not a regular reader of your column, but I badly need your advice. I hope you can help me.

I am very much in love with this man. I would do anything to win his love, but I'm not sure he can love any woman. What can I do? What should *I do?*

My first impulse was to call her immediately and give her the only advice possible: stop seeing Darrel at once before she was hurt even more. But I could not do that; her knowing I was Dear Alice would only humiliate her. The fact that she had written the letter at all had to be taken as a measure of her desperation. And I

could not answer the letter in the column, either.

I wrote her a short note immediately.

You have no choice. You must stop seeing this man immediately. Men such as the one you write about are destroyers. You will be badly hurt.

An answer came two days later:

Dear Alice: What kind of a choice do you offer me? I have told myself any number of times that this man means heartbreak for me. But this does no good. I love him. I'm desperate. There must be something I can do to get him to love me. Please, please help me!

There was a note of hysteria in the letter that frightened me. I replied by return mail.

There is no help I can give you. Apparently you are beyond help. Have you no pride, no dignity? Stop and think clearly, logically, not like a female. Think what you are doing to yourself. There is nothing more disgusting than a woman who throws herself at a man who does not care for her. And please do not write again. I have no time to spare for fools.

It was a harsh letter. Perhaps it would seem needlessly cruel to most people. But I hoped to shock her to her senses; I hoped to enrage her enough so she could stand back and understand what she was doing to herself.

Two days later I read an item in the morning paper.

"Nora Kenmore, 24, was found dead of an overdose of barbiturates in her apartment. Miss Kenmore, part-time secretary and bit actress, lived alone and was discovered dead by a friend. Miss Kenmore was from Ohio. Attempts to contact surviving relatives have so far been unsuccessful.

"Investigators will not state at this time if death was accidental or a suicice. No suicide note was found."

The enormity of it was simply too much for me to take in. I sat stunned for a long time, reading that brief item over and over. At first I told myself the paper was in error. It could not be the Nora I knew.

Yet I knew it was.

Slowly, like a piece of garbage in a bucket of swill, a name floated to the surface of my mind.

Darrel.

He had killed her as surely as though he had held a gun to her head.

There was a gun in my study, a small automatic locked away in a file drawer. It had belonged to my father and left to me as a part of Mother's estate. I suppose that was the only reason I had kept it, because it had come to me through her. I had never fired it or any gun.

I got the gun and dropped it into my topcoat pocket. It never occurred to me to wonder if it would

fire. I was astonished to discover that it was dark outside. It had been shortly past noon when I opened the paper.

As on the night I had seen Darrel last, he was home. He was wearing the same smoking jacket but seemed reasonably sober.

He looked at me.

There was a strange, unreadable look in his eyes, which were bloodshot and troubled. He had not taken Nora's death easily, I could see.

Perhaps I should have felt some vestige of pity. But, as a matter of record, his very distress made me loath him all the more. He had brought this terrible thing to pass —let him pay the full price!

"Martin, I tried your phone several times this afternoon but you didn't answer. My God, it's terrible about Nora!"

"Is it, Darrel?"

"Of course it is!" He looked more closely at me and took a step back. "What kind of a question is that?"

"You killed her, Darrel. I knew something like this would happen if you kept on. You killed Nora."

"Now wait a minute, guy! You're talking nonsense!"

"Am I, Darrel?"

I took the gun out of my pocket and shot him twice near the heart. The impact of the bullets sent him staggering back. When the backs of his legs struck the couch, he sat down abruptly. He sat leaning forward slightly, arms crossed over his stomach. On his face was a look of utter surprise.

Then he began to smile. He said hoarsely, "You know what's funny, Martin? Nora was in love with you."

"What are you saying?"

"That night we had dinner at your place? She told me on the way over." His voice was noticeably weaker. "That's why I was so raunchy all evening."

"I don't believe you!"

"You'd better believe it." His laughter was a strangled sound. "After we left, she told me she was going to write a letter to your column, hoping you would . . ."

"My column? She never knew I wrote the column!"

"But she did. I told her, you see. I thought it would be good for a laugh. But I guess it wasn't so funny, after . . ."

Without warning his eyes rolled back in their sockets, and he tumbled head-first off the couch to lie very still.

My gaze was drawn to the bedroom door which had been closed when I came in. It was open now, and a woman wearing very little clothing stood there. Her mouth was open, and I knew she was screaming.

But I could not hear her over the roaring sound in my head.

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The Fall of Sentimental Simpson

by

EDGAR

WALLACE

A suave and whimsical exposé of sentimental burglary . . . by one of England's mystery fiction immortals.

ACCORDING TO CERTAIN signs, the amateur detective thought his French window had been forced by a left-handed man who wore square-toed boots; the muddy print of the latter against the enamel of the door seemed to prove this beyond doubt. The direction of the knife-cuts in the putty about the window-glass supported the left-handed view.

Another point: Only a left-handed man would have thought of sawing through the left fold of the shutter.

The tenant of Wisteria Lodge explained all this to the real detective, who sat stolidly on the other side of the table in the former's dining-room at three o'clock in the morning, listening to the interesting hypothesis.

"I think if you look for a left-handed man with square-toed boots—or they may be shoes—you will discover the robber."

"Ah," said the real detective, and swallowed his whisky deliberately.

"The curious thing about the burglary is this, that although my cash-box was opened and contained over four hundred pounds, the money was untouched. The little tray on top had not been even lifted out. My dear wife kept a lock of hair of her pet poodle Fifi—the poor little dear was poisoned last year by those horrible people at The Limes. I'm sure they did it."

"What about this lock of hair?" asked the detective, suddenly interested.

"It was damp, quite damp," explained the householder. "Now, as I say, my theory is that the man wore square-toed boots and a mackintosh. He was undoubtedly left-handed."

"I see," said the real detective.

Then Detective-Sergeant Button went forth and took Sentimental Simpson out of his bed, not be-

cause he wore square-toed shoes (nor was he left-handed), but because there were certain tell-tale indications which pointed unmistakably to one man.

Mr. Simpson came blinking into the passage. He wore a shirt and an appearance of profound surprise.

"Hullo, Mr. Button," he said. "Bless me, you gave me quite a start. I went to bed early tonight with the toothache, an' when I

heard you knock I says to myself—"

"Get your trousers on," said Detective-Sergeant Button.

Simpson hesitated for just a fraction of a second and then retired to his sleeping apartment. Mr. Button bent his head and listened attentively for the sound of a stealthily opened window.

But Simpson did not run.

"And your coat and shoes," said Button testily. "I'm surprised at you, Simpson—you never gave me this trouble before."

Simpson accepted the reproach with amazement. "You don't mean to tell me that you want me?" he said incredulously, and added that if heaven in its anger deprived him of his life at that very moment, and on the spot, which he indicated with a grimy forefinger, he had been in bed since a quarter to ten.

"Don't let us have an argument," said Mr. Button, and accompanied his guest to the police station.

On the day of the trial, whilst he was waiting in the corridor to go up the flight of stairs that leads to the dock, Simpson saw Buttons again, for the first time since his arrest.

"Mr. Button," he said, "I hope there is no ill-feeling between you and me?"

"None whatever, Simpson."

"I don't think you are going to get a conviction," said Simpson thoughtfully. He was a round-faced, small-eyed man with a gentle voice, and when he looked thoughtful his eyes had the appearance of having retreated a little farther into his head.

Mr. Button merely shook his head.

"What made you think it was me?" Simpson went on, when his query was greeted with silence.

"Who else would get upset over a lock of hair?" Button asked significantly, and the eyes of his prisoner grew moist.

"Hair was always a weakness of mine," Simpson said, with a catch in his voice. "A relic of what you might call a loved one . . . somebody who has passed, Mr. Button, to the Great Beyond. It sort of brings a—well, we've all got our feelings."

"We have," admitted Button understandingly. "But talking about feelings, Simpson, what are my feelings going to be if I get a tongue-lashing from the judge for bringing you up without sufficient evidence? I don't think you'll escape, but you know how juries are! Now, what about making a nice little statement? Just own up that you 'broke and entered' and I'll go into the box and say a good word for you. You don't want to make *me* look silly, do you?"

"I don't," confessed Simpson. "At the same time, I don't want to make myself look silly by owning up to a crime which, in a manner

of speaking, is abhorrent to my nature."

"Think of what my poor wife will say if I get it in the neck from the judge," Button said. "It'll break her heart."

"Don't," gulped Mr. Simpson. "Don't do it. I can't stand it, Mr. Button."

What he might have done had the conversation been protracted is a matter for speculation. At that moment the warders haled Simpson up the steps leading to the dock.

And such was the weakness of the evidence against him that the jury found him not guilty without leaving the box.

"I cannot congratulate the police on the conduct of this case," said the judge severely, and Simpson, looking upon the crestfallen face of Sergeant Button, thought of Mrs. Button's broken heart, and had to be assisted from the dock.

So Mr. Simpson went back to his little room in Castel Street. He had an uncomfortable feeling that he had failed a friend in the hour of his need, and strove vainly to banish from his mind the thought of the shattered harmony of Detective Button's household.

It drew him just a little farther from contact with the world in which he lived, for he was not a popular man and had few friends. One by one they had fallen away in consequence of his degrading weakness.

Lew Saffron, who had openly and publicly stated at the Nine Crowns that Simpson was the greatest artist in crime who had ever smashed a safe. And had as publicly challenged the American top-notchers to better Mr. Simpson's work in connection with the unauthorized opening of Epstein's Jewelry Emporium. But even Lew eventually dropped him after a disastrous partnership.

"It would have been a success and we'd have gotten away with the finest parcel of stones that ever was taken in one haul," he said, relative to a certain Hatton Garden job which he had worked with Simpson. "But what happened? He got the safe open and I was downstairs, watching the street for the police, expecting him to come down with the stuff.

"I waited for ten minutes and then went up, and what did I see? Simpson sitting on the floor, and crying his eyes out over some old love letters that Van Voss kept in his safe! Letters from a flighty little typist that Van Voss had been in love with. He said they touched him to the core. He wanted to go and kill Van Voss, and by the time I'd got him quiet the street was full of law. We got away over the roof, but no more Simpson for me, thank you!"

Mr. Simpson sighed as he realized his lonely state. Nevertheless his afternoon was not unprofitably spent, for there were six more

chapters of *The Old Curiosity Shop* to be read before, red-eyed, he returned the book to the public library which he patronized.

He had an appointment that evening with Charles Balentino, keeper of a bar at Kennington and a man of some standing in the underworld.

He was a tall man, sturdy of build—though his appearance is of no importance—and deliberate of speech. He greeted Mr. Simpson reproachfully and in his heaviest manner.

"What's this I hear about the job you did, Simpson? I couldn't believe my eyes when I read it in the newspaper. Got acquitted, too! You ought to have had ten years!"

Mr. Simpson looked uncomfortable.

"Left four hundred and thirty pounds in notes in a box you had opened, and that wasn't even locked?" the other went on. "What's the matter with you, Simpson?" Charles Balentino's tone was one of amazement, incredulity and admonishment.

"I can't help it, Mr. Balentino." There were tears in Sentimental Simpson's eyes. "When I saw that lock of hair on the tray and thought perhaps that it was a lock of the hair of his mother, treasured, so to speak—"

Here Mr. Simpson's voice failed him, and he had to swallow before he continued: "It's my weakness, Mr. Balentino. I just couldn't go any farther."

Mr. Balentino puffed thoughtfully at his cigar. "You owe me seventy pounds," he said. "I suppose you know that?" When Simpson remained silent he added unpleasantly: "Seventy pounds is seventy pounds."

Simpson nodded, a look of deep contrition in his eyes.

"It cost me thirty pounds for a mouthpiece," Balentino continued. "Twenty-five pounds for that new lot of tools I got you, when you came out of stir last May. Ten pounds I lent you to do that Manchester job, which you never paid me back—the so-called jewelry you brought down was all Birmingham stuff, nine carat, and not worth the freight charges—and here you had a chance of getting real money. Well, I'm surprised at you, that's all I can say, Simpson."

Simpson shook his head unhappily.

Mr. Balentino, thinking that perhaps he had gone as far as was necessary, beckoned the waiter—the conference took place at a little bar in Soho—and asked his companion: "What will you have, Simpson?"

"Gin," said the wretched Simpson.

"Gin goes with tears." Mr. Balentino was firm. "Have a more manly drink."

"Beer," corrected Simpson despondently.

"Now I'll tell you what it is," said Mr. Balentino, when their needs had been satisfied. "Things can't go on as they are going. I am a practical man, and I've got to make money. I don't mind taking a risk when I'm guaranteed a reasonable return on my investment in time and money. But I tell you, Simpson, straight, that I'm going to turn legitimate unless some of you lads pay more attention to business.

"Why," he went on indignantly, "in the old days I never had this kind of trouble. Willie Topple never gave me, what I might term, a moment's uneasiness."

It was always serious when Mr. Balentino dragged Willie Topple from his grave in Exeter Jail and set him up as a model of industry. Sentimental Simpson moved uncomfortably in his velvet chair.

"Willie was always on the spot, and if he did a job, there was the stuff all nicely packed up," said Mr. Balentino reminiscently. "He'd just step into the saloon bar, order a drink, and shove the stuff across the counter. 'You might keep this box of chocolates for me, Mr. Balentino.' That's what he'd say, and there it was, every article wrapped in tissue paper. I used to compare them with the items published in the police lists, and never once did Willie deliver short."

Mr. Balentino sighed. "Times have changed," he added bitterly. "Some of you lads have got so careless that my heart's in my mouth every time a plainclothesman strolls into the bar. And what do I get out of it? Why, Willie Topple drew seventeen hundred pounds commission from me in one year. You owe me seventy!"

"I admit it's a bit of a risk, being a fence—" began Mr. Simpson.

"A what?" said the other sharply. "What was that word you used, Simpson?"

Mr. Simpson was silent.

"Never use that expression to me. A fence! Do you mean a receiver of stolen property? I mind things for people. I take a few articles, so to speak, in pawn for my customers. I'm surprised at you, Simpson."

He did not wait for Mr. Simpson to express his contrition, but bending forward over the table, lowered his voice until it was little more than a rumble of subterranean sound.

"There's a place in Park Crescent, Number One Seventy-six," he said deliberately. "That's the

very job for you, Simpson. Next Sunday night is the best time, because there will only be the kid in the house. There's a fortune in jewellery, pearl necklaces, diamond brooches, and the father and mother are away at Brighton. They're going to a wedding.

"I've had the house cased—a window-cleaner it was—and he says all the stuff is kept in a little safe under the mother's bed. The best time is after eleven. They go to bed early . . . and a pantry window that you can reach from the back of the house, only a wall to climb, and that's in a mews. Now, what do you say, Simpson?"

Simpson scratched his chin. "I'll have a look round," he said cautiously. "I don't take much notice of these window-cleaners. One put me on to the job at Purley—"

"Let bygones be bygones," said Mr. Balentino. "I know all about that Purley business. You'd have made a profit if your damn curiosity hadn't made you stop to read the funeral cards in the cook's bedroom. And after we'd got the cook called away to the north so that you should have no trouble and an empty house to work in! The question is, will you do this, or shall I put Harry Welting on it? He is not as good a man as you, I admit, though he hasn't your failings."

"I'll do it," said Mr. Simpson, and the other nodded approvingly.

"If a fiver is any good to you—?" he said.

"It will be a lot of good to me," said Mr. Simpson fervently, and the money was passed.

IT WAS MIDNIGHT on the 26th of June, and it was raining—according to Mr. Simpson's extravagant description—cats and dogs, when he turned into Park News, a deserted and gloomy thoroughfare devoted to the storage of mechanical vehicles. He had marked the little gate in the wall by daylight. The wall itself was eight feet in height and surmounted by spikes. Mr. Simpson favored walls so guarded. The spikes, if they were not too old, served to attach the light rope he carried.

In two minutes he was over the wall and was working scientifically at the pantry window. Ten minutes afterwards he was hanging up his wet mackintosh in the hall. He paused only to slip back the bolts of the door, unfasten the chain, and turn the key softly, before he mounted the thickly-carpeted stairs.

The house was in darkness. Only the slow tick of the hall-clock broke the complete stillness, and Mr. Simpson walked up the stairs, keeping time to the clock, so that any accidental creak he made might be confounded by a listener with the rhythmic noise of the timepiece.

The first bedroom which he entered was untenanted. He gathered from the richness of the furnishings

that this was the room occupied by the father and mother, who were now participating in the Brighton festivities.

He made a thorough and professional examination of the dressing-table, found and pocketed a small diamond brooch of no enormous value, choked at the silver-framed picture of a little girl that stood upon the dressing-table, but crushed down his emotions ruthlessly.

The second bedroom was less ornate, and like the other, untenanted. Here he drew blank. It was evidently a room reserved for visitors; the dressing-table was empty as also was the wardrobe. Then he remembered and went back to the room he had searched and flashed his torch under the bed. There was no sign of a safe. It may be in the third room, thought Mr. Simpson, and turned the handle of the door softly.

He knew, the moment he stepped inside, that the big four-poster bed he could dimly see was occupied. He could hear the regular breathing of the sleeper and for a second he hesitated. Then stepping forward carefully, he moved to the side of the bed, and listened again.

Yes, the breathing was regular. He dare not put his lamp upon the sleeper. This must be the child's room, he guessed, and contented himself with stooping and showing a beam of light beneath the bed. He gasped. There was the 'safe'! A squat, steel box. He put out the light and laid the torch gently upon the floor, then groping beneath the bed, he gripped the box and slid it toward him. It was very heavy, but not too heavy to carry.

Drawing the treasure clear of the bed, he slipped his torch in his pocket and lifted the box. If it had been the safe he had expected, his success would have been impossible of achievement. As it was, the weight of this repository taxed his strength. Presently he had it well gripped and began a slow retreat.

He was halfway across the room when there was a click, and the room was flooded with light. In his natural agitation the box slipped from his fingers. He made a wild grab to recover his hold, and did succeed in putting it down without noise, but no more. And then he turned open-mouthed to the child who was watching him curiously from the bed.

Never in his life had Sentimental Simpson seen a child so ethereal in her loveliness. A mass of golden hair was tied back by a blue ribbon, and the big eyes that were fixed on him showed neither fear nor alarm. She sat up in bed, her thin white hands clasping the knees doubled beneath the coverlet, an interested and not unamused spectator of Mr. Simpson's embarrassment.

"Good evening, Mr. Burglar," she said softly, and smiled.

Simpson swallowed something. "Good evening, miss," he said huskily. "I hope I haven't come into the wrong house. A friend of mine told me to call and get a box he had forgotten."

"You're a burglar," she said, nodding wisely. "*Of course* you're a burglar. I am awfully glad to see you. I have always wanted to meet a burglar."

Mr. Simpson, a prey to various emotions, could think of no suitable reply. He looked down at the box and he looked at the child; and then he blinked furiously.

"Come and sit here," she pointed to a chair by the side of the bed.

The dazed burglar obeyed.

"How long have you been a burglar?" she demanded.

"Oh, quite a long time, miss," said Mr. Simpson weakly.

"You should not have said that. You should have said that this was your first crime," she told him. "When you were a little boy, were you a burglar?"

"No, miss," said the miserable Simpson.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you that you mustn't be a burglar?" asked the child, and Simpson broke down.

"My poor old mother!" he sobbed.

It is true to say that in her lifetime the late Mrs. Simpson had evoked no extravagant expressions of affection from her children, who had been rescued from her tender care at an early age and had been educated at the rate-payers' expense. But the word 'mother' always affected Mr. Simpson that way.

"Poor man," said the child tenderly. She reached out her hand and laid it upon Mr. Simpson's bowed head. "Do your little children know that you are a burglar?" she asked.

"No, miss," sobbed Simpson.

He had no little children. He had never been married, but any reference to his children always brought a lump into his throat. By spiritual adoption he had secured quite a large family.

Sometimes, in periods of temporary retirement from the activities and competition of life, he had brooded in his cell, his head in his hands, on how his darling little Joan would miss her daddy, and had in consequence enjoyed the most exquisite of mental tortures.

"Are you a burglar because you are hungry?"

Mr. Simpson nodded. He could not trust himself to speak.

"You should say 'I'm starving, miss!" she pointed out gently. "Are you starving?"

Mr. Simpson nodded again.

"Poor burglar!"

Again her hand caressed his head, and now he could not restrain himself any longer. He fell on his knees by the side of the bed and, burying his head in his arms, his shoulders heaved.

He heard her slip out of bed on the other side and the shuffle of her slippered feet as she crossed the room.

"I am going to get you some food, Mr. Burglar," she said softly.

All Mr. Simpson's ill-spent life passed before his anguished eyes as he waited. He would reform, he swore. He would live an honest life. The influence of this sweet, innocent child should bear its fruit. Dear little soul, he thought, as he mopped his tear-stained face. She was down there in that dark, cold kitchen, getting him food. How brave she was!

It was a long time before she came back bearing a tray that was almost too heavy for her frail figure to support. He took it from her hands reverently and laid it on the table.

She was wearing a blue silk dressing-gown that emphasized the purity of her delicate skin. He could only look at her in awe and wonder.

"You must eat, Mr. Burglar," she said gently.

"I couldn't eat a mouthful, miss," he protested, tearfully. "What you said to me has so upset me that if I eat a crumb, it will choke me."

He did not mention, perhaps he had forgotten, that an hour previous he had supped to repletion. She seemed to understand, and sat down on the edge of the bed, her grave eyes watching him.

"You must tell me about yourself," she said. "I should like to know about you, so that I can pray for you, Mr. Burglar."

"Don't, miss!" blubbered Mr. Simpson. "Don't do it! I can't stand it! I have been a terrible man. I used to be a lob-crawler once. You don't know what a lob-crawler is? I used to rob cash registers. And then I used to do ladder work. You know, miss, I put ladders up against the windows whilst the family was in the dining-room and got away with the stuff. And then I did that job at Hoxton, the fur burglary. There was a lot about it in the papers—me and a fellow named Koses."

The girl nodded.

"But I am going to give it up, though, miss," said Simpson huskily. "I am going to chuck Balentino, and if I owe him seventy pounds, why, I'll pay him out of the money I earn honestly."

"Who is Balentino?"

"He's a fence, miss. You wouldn't know what a fence is. He keeps the Bottle and Glass public-house down Atherby Road, Kennington."

"Poor man," the little girl said, shaking her head. "Poor burglar, I am so sorry for you."

Mr. Simpson choked. "I think I'll go, miss, if you don't mind."

She nodded and held out her hand.

He took it in his and kissed it. He had seen such things done in films. Yet it was with a lightened

heart, and with a knowledge of a great burden of crime and sin rolled away from his conscience that he walked down the stairs, his head erect, charged with a high purpose.

He opened the door and walked out, literally and figuratively into the arms of Inspector John Coleman, X-Division; Sergeant Arthur John Welby of X-Division; and Detective-Sergeant Charles John Smith, also of X-Division.

"Bless my heart and soul," said the inspector, "if it isn't Simpson!"

Mr. Simpson said nothing for a moment, then: "I have been visiting a friend."

"And now you are coming to stay with us. What a fine weekend you are having!" said Sergeant Smith.

AT FOUR O'CLOCK in the morning, Mr. Simpson stirred uneasily on his wooden bed. A voice had disturbed him. It was a loud and an aggressive voice, and it came from the corridor outside his cell. He heard the click and clash of a turning lock.

"So far as I'm concerned," said the voice, "I'm a perfectly innocent man, and if any person has made a statement derogatory to my good name, I'll have the law on him, if there is a law."

"Oh, there's a law all right," said the voice of Detective Smith. "In you go, Balentino," and then the door was slammed.

Mr. Simpson sat up and took notice.

Balentino!

The next morning when he was conducted by the Assistant Jailer to perform his ablutions, he caught a glimpse of his former employer. It was the merest glimpse, for the grating in the cell-door is not a large one, but he heard Mr. Balentino's exclamation of annoyance, and when he returned, the big man hissed at him: "So you're the nose, are you, Simpson, you dirty dog!"

"Don't say it, Mr. Balentino," said Simpson brokenly, for it hurt him that any man should think him guilty of so despicable an action.

That their crimes were associated was proved when they stepped into the dock together, with policemen between them—the constabulary having been inserted for the sake of peace and quietness. Yet, despite their position, Mr. Simpson was by no means depressed. His heart sank a song of joy at his reformation.

Perhaps he would see the girl, that angel child, again.

Looking round the court eagerly, a wave of joy swept through his being, for he had seen her. That was enough. He would serve whatever sentence was passed, and tears of happiness fell from his eyes and splashed on the steel rail of the dock. The Assistant Jailer thoughtfully wiped them off. Rust spots are very difficult to eradicate,

unless they are dealt with immediately.

And then to his delight she came forward. A sweet figure of childhood, she seemed, as she stood in the witness stand. Her eyes rested on him for a second and she smiled.

"If you want to cry, cry on the floor!" warned the assistant jailer, and rubbed the rail savagely with his handkerchief.

A lawyer rose in the body of the court.

"Your name is Marie Wilson?" he said.

"Yes, sir," she replied in a voice of such pure harmony that it thrilled Simpson to the core of his being.

"You are professionally known as 'Baby Bellingham'?"

"Yes, sir," said the child.

"And you are at present engaged at the Hilarity Theatre in a play called *The Child and the Burglar?*"

"Yes, sir," she answered, with a proud glance at the dazzled Simpson.

"And I think I am stating the fact," said the lawyer, "that your experience last night was practically a repetition of the action of your play?"

"Yes, sir," said the child, "except that he wouldn't say his lines. I did try hard to make him."

The magistrate was looking at a paper on his desk. "I see there is a report of this occurrence in this morning's newspaper," he said, and read the headline: " 'Child

actress reduces hardened burglar to tears by her artistry'."

Miss Wilson nodded gravely. "After I had gone downstairs to get him his supper and had rung up the police on the telephone," she said, "I also rang up my press agent. My father says that I must always ring up my press agent. Father says that two lines on the news pages are worth two columns amongst the advertisements. Father says—"

IT WAS TEN months after this when Mr. Simpson and Mr. Balentino met. They were loading coal into a large cart drawn by a famous old horse which is the pride of Dartmoor Jail. The warder in

charge of the party was at a sufficient distance to allow a free interchange of courtesies.

"And when I get out," said Mr. Balentino, tremulous with wrath, "I am going to make Kennington too hot to hold you, Simpson. A chicken-hearted fellow like you oughtn't to be in our kind of business.

"To think that a respectable tradesman should be herded with common felons because a babbling, bat-eyed bungler gets sloppy over a kid and gives away his friends.

"And an actress, too . . . stringing you along, you poor turnip! Doing her play with you as the hero! My God, you're a disgrace to the profession!"

But Simpson was standing erect, leaning on his shovel and staring across the yard.

In the angle of two high walls was a mound of loose earth which had been brought in to treat the governor's garden, and on the face of the dun-coloured heap were vivid green shoots tipped with blue. They had come, it seemed, in a night, for this was the month of early spring.

"Bluebells!" quavered Mr. Simpson. His lip trembled and he wiped his eyes with the cuff of his coat.

Bluebells always made Mr. Simpson cry.

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DIAL 'H' FOR HOLDUP

Ashen, he heard the cold voice on the phone. "There's a gun trained on you. Make one wrong move and you're dead!"

By STEVE APRIL

SHERIFF HOLDEN'S great dislike of Sergeant Carey stemmed from a number of minor items: Carey's squad car was a newer model than Holden's heap; the

sergeant's colorful, tight-fitting uniform emphasized his lean figure, just as Sheriff Holden's baggy suit fitted his flabby body. Then there was the matter of authority. As a State Trooper, Carey's authority covered far more territory than the sheriff's. But now, as they stood outside the service station, Holden was obviously enjoying himself at Carey's expense.

Pushing his sweat-stained, shapeless hat back on his big head, Holden said, "Carey, I'm giving you this one on a silver platter, everything all tied up nice and neat. I'm even holding the thief for you in my jail. Merely called you as a formality, since Sam's gas station is just across the county line, as you know. But I have all—"

Turning to Sam, the giant service station operator who towered over both officers, Carey asked, "Let me hear this again, from the top. Sam, you were actually robbed via the telephone?"

"That's it, Sarge. It's getting so you never know from where they're going to hit," Sam said quickly, glad to be the center of attraction. "A couple of hours ago, right after the noon rush, I was in the office when the phone rang. A muffled voice says, 'We got a high powered telescopic rifle trained on you. Do as we say and you're okay. Make one wrong move and you get drilled in the back, right through the plate glass window.'

"Well, Sarge, naturally at first I thought it was a gag. Still holding the receiver, I stepped to the doorway, to look around. Being down in a valley here, there isn't much for me to see except Judge Benson's white house way up there, and part of Charley Moore's general store up on Ridge Road, on the other side of the valley. But this joker on the phone was sure watching me. He told me, 'Keep standing in the doorway and we'll blow your thick head off! I can see you clearly from this phone booth and I'm signaling my buddy with his rifle right now, so if you want to keep breathing—' "

"You get that dumb slip of the tongue, Carey?" Sheriff Holden cut in. "The dumb punk said he was in a phone booth! There's one smack outside of Charley's store up there!"

Sergeant Carey followed the sheriff's fat finger, pointing to where the late afternoon sun hit the window of a store on the road above the woods. Carey said, "That's far away for a rifle. Must be over a mile, with the trees blocking a clear shot. Also, a guy could hardly shoot a rifle in front of a store without being seen."

Holden laughed in Carey's face. "Yeah? These punks are clever, or thought they were. Remember, Carey, the one on the phone said he had a partner someplace down here, covering Sam. All he had to handkerchief, or something. But do was signal his buddy with a

don't let it worry you. Like I said, I got the fellow who was in the phone booth, so no need for all this talk."

Turning back to Sam again, Carey asked, "Go on. What happened next?"

"Naturally, once I knew the guy was really watching me, I got jumpy, me all alone and exposed here. And I make a big target. The guy on the phone tells me, 'Take a paper bag and empty out all the cash in your register. Make it fast!' Sarge, I had no choice, I did like he said. Then he says, 'And empty that cigar box below the counter, the box where you keep the big green. That's right—all of it.' "

Sam shook his head nervously. "Look, Sarge, I know what you're thinking. I'm big enough to handle myself and I've tangled with stick-up punks before. But this—it gave me the creeps. You can't slug a voice on the phone, the way he knew every move I was making. Hell, I had to follow orders.

"The voice says, 'Don't hang up. Just walk down the road with the bag. When you reach the bend in the road, leave the bag in the center of the land they've cleaned for the new factory. Then come back here. If you happen to see anybody on the road, don't say a word or try anything or it will be your last walk. Drop the bag in the clearing, then come back here, on the double.'

"Sarge, I had two-hundred and sixty-eight dollars, all told, in the bag, I started running down the road, left the bag in the clearing, like I was told. I was in an awful sweat, and not just from all that running, I expected to hear the crack of a rifle from the woods any second. Well, I dashed back here, panting like crazy. The receiver was still off the hook, like he told

me to do and the second I picked it up the voice said;

"You're playing it smart. My partner is going for the bag now, but remember I'm still watching you. Keep the receiver off and don't go near the phone for the next half hour. If anybody stops for gas, watch your mouth, don't gesture with your hands or you *and* your customer will be shot. It's now exactly twenty after two. At a quarter to three you can do what you want. *But not before then!*' "

Sam shrugged his big shoulders. "That's all of it, Sarge."

"You waited until two forty-five, then what?" Carey asked.

"Sam phoned me, of course," Sheriff Holden said impatiently. "I raced out here and we went to the field. The bag of money was gone, of course. But—well, since I have Danny Judd in the can, no sense

of all this chatter. Let's go, Carey. You can pick up your prisoner."

Carey asked, "Sam, are you certain you've told me every word that was said on the phone?"

"Word for word. Man, I'll never forget that conversation! No sir, that was it, word for word."

"One more question: from the moment you first answered the phone, to the time you left your gas station with the bag of money, how much time do you think lapsed?"

Sam rubbed his stubbled chin. "I don't know, I went to the door and looked out and—about ten minutes."

"That long? Could it have been five minutes?"

"No sir, Sarge. It had to be at least ten minutes or more. It took time to empty the register."

Carey brushed a speck off his baby-blue pants as he asked, "How many people knew you kept your big bills in a cigar box, Sam?"

"Everybody knew it," Holden said. "Any time Sam was given a ten or twenty bucks, he'd make change from the cigar box. Carey, I keep telling you the case is solved. After I phoned your barracks, I checked with Charley Moore. We got a break. Charley clearly recalled Danny Judd using the outside phone booth between about one-thirty and two. Charley even kidded Danny, saying he was in the booth so long he ought to charge him rent.

"Judd denies the holdup, of course, but admitted he was in the booth all that time. He was calling his wife. She wasn't home. He figured she was out with the baby, getting some air, so he stayed in the phone booth, trying to get her every five minutes or so. He never did reach her, but the point is, Danny is our boy.

"Sweat him and you'll learn who his partner was. Danny's been out of work and he likes the bottle, so it all adds."

Carey looked up at the top floor of the white house in the woods, high up on the other side of the valley. "A person in Judge Benson's house would have a perfect view of the gas station and with good binoculars, he could see the hairs on Sam's chin."

"Carey, are you out of your mind, accusing the judge?" the sheriff gasped.

"I haven't accused anybody, yet. Who lives there beside the judge, Holden?"

"Look, I don't see— Well, his wife, but old Mrs. Benson's been sick in bed for the last few months. Then there's Bert Kahn and his wife Bertha;—they work for the judge. Been with him for years, decent folks. Bill Benson, the judge's nephew, has been visiting him for the last week."

"Where's this nephew from?"

"From? He goes to some college, out in California. He's a snotty young fellow, but the way I hear it, he's the judge's only kin.

Some day he'll come into the house and all the judge's money."

Sergeant Carey called to the state trooper sitting behind the wheel of the squad car, "Jerry, there's a young fellow named Bill Benson in that white house up there. Bring him down here for questioning. Be careful. This isn't an arrest, but if he acts up, keep a hand on your gun."

Holden's jowled face went pale. "Carey, have you flipped? The judge is so big in politics in the county, he can tear your badge up!"

Carey grinned. "It's my shield."

Fifteen minutes later Bill Benson was sitting in the gas station office, at ease and bored. Tall and rangy, about twenty-one, everything about him from his expensive clothes to his every movement had an easy casualness—except his eyes, which were bright and sharp. Heavyset and whitehaired Judge Benson looked every inch the TV version of the stern judge as he stood beside his nephew, scowling.

Sheriff Holden said, "Judge, this isn't my idea. We're outside the village and Sergeant Carey is running this show."

"That's right, sir," Carey told the judge. He stared at Bill Benson. "Look, let's not waste time. You can make it easier for yourself by telling me where the two hundred and sixty-eight dollars you picked up in the paper bag is."

"What money? What bag? I haven't the smallest idea what the hell you're talking about," Bill Benson said calmly. "But I do know I will most certainly sue you for false arrest, if this is an arrest."

Glaring at both Carey and his nephew, Judge Benson asked the State Trooper, "Sergeant, exactly what are you holding my nephew for?"

"Sir, I'm merely questioning him as a suspect in a robbery, at the moment."

"This is the dumbest thing I ever heard," Bill Benson said. "I—"

"Legally, you don't have to answer any questions, Bill," the judge told his nephew.

"Look, Uncle, I have nothing to hide. I'll answer his stupid questions. I find it amusing and it's been a dull day, so far."

Sergeant Carey snapped, "I know you phoned Sam from the judge's house, gave him this bull yarn about having a partner covering him with a rifle. After Sam left the bag of money in the empty building lot, as you told him, you came down through the woods and picked it up. Clever angle, robbing by phone, but—"

"Really, officer, is this a dream of yours? I still have no idea of what you're talking about."

"All these perfect crime set-ups always stumble over the unforeseen," Carey went on. "In this case, you had no way of knowing that a kid, hunting rabbits in the woods, was a witness, might identify you as

the man he saw pick up the money bag, and—"

"That's hot air. Nobody saw me! I carefully studied the woods before—" Bill Benson began, seemingly not realizing what he was saying until the judge roared, "You petty crook! You—cheap punk!"

Bill's sharp eyes swept the room, then he shrugged his slight shoulders. "Okay, I know when I've had it. But I also know something about the law. Remember, this wasn't armed robbery and—" He nodded toward Sam, "this big bum is lying for his insurance. There was only one-hundred seventy-three dollars and forty-nine cents in the bag. You'll find it in the dresser drawer, in my room. I was so sure I'd get at least a half a grand or—"

The judge roared again, "To think my own brother's son—"

"Cut another record, Uncle," Bill said. "If you weren't so damn tight with your dough, sitting on all those bank accounts as if expecting them to hatch, if you'd given me a few bills to operate with, like I asked, I wouldn't have been forced to look for loot somewhere else. Okay, copper. Take me away from this ham uncle of mine before he explodes."

Later, as Holden and Carey were having coffee in a stool joint opposite the sheriff's office, Holden said, "The case seemed so open and shut— How come you didn't even bother questioning Danny Judd?"

"Obviously the caller said he was in a phone booth to throw us a curve. Would have been a waste of time to—"

"Come off it, Carey. How could you be so damn positive it wasn't a slip of the tongue, without at least checking?"

Carey grinned the kind of superior smile which always annoyed the hell out of Sheriff Holden. "Because Sam said they talked on the phone for at least ten minutes and he didn't say anything about the *phone operator breaking into the conversation to ask for another nickel!* So I knew the call couldn't have come from a public booth here, had to be from a private line, and the Benson house was the only one with a view of the gas station.

"Another thing. I've been to California and in some sections of the state, where you have unlimited phone calls for a set monthly sum, even in the public booths there, once you drop your dime in and are making a local call, you can talk for as long as you like. Young Benson forgot he wasn't in California."

Carey stood up, brushing a wrinkle or two from his snappy uniform. Winking down at Sheriff Holden, he added," You ought to travel more, Holden, maybe get some of that California sun on your pasty skin. Anyway, thanks for the coffee. Now I must get back to the barracks, to some real cases."

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PARADISE NIGHTMARE

Treachery was her pilot, murder her charter, as Kondos' cruiser headed for uncharted seas—and a trip which would bring him money or death. He needed money more than life right now, so . . .

by ED LACY

"Listen, I'm sorry about your father being killed. . . . If the police . . . Honey, it wasn't my fault . . . I was bringing him back. Two . . . two deaths . . . I just run the boat. Tell the police, we were merely fishing when . . ."

Talking suddenly seemed the most tiring thing I'd ever done, but before I blacked out again, I saw her lower the carbine she held on me . . .

ELEVEN in the morning and no chance of a charter. At six two dozen fishing boats had been berthed at this dock, including the best sea boat of them all, my thirty-six-foot cruiser.

My boat was still tied to the dock, along with a dirty sailboat hull passing for a fishing boat, which I wouldn't trust in a bathtub. During the five weeks I'd been a full time charter fishing captain, I'd had exactly two parties.

A HIGH-VOLTAGE CRIME NOVELET

A cab drew up and a stout man in worn slacks and a new windbreaker got out. Tipping my carefully battered cap, I asked, "Going fishing, sir?"

"I was thinking of throwing a line over. What do you charge?"

"Fifty dollars a day. But I'll take you out until three for twenty. That's my boat, *Capital Gains,* at the end of the dock. Safe as a liner."

"She sure looks pretty. Twenty bucks?"

"Yes sir." I saw Kenny coming toward us, walking as though stepping on air. He was a loose-jointed lush with wild, sandy hair. He was a good boat man when sober.

"Take a look at her, mister," I said. "You'll never see a better built boat."

Walking down the dock, we passed the sailboat hull and this fat slob in stained pants and torn undershirt yelled to the man with me, "Why, hello Mr. Davis!" and scrambled up onto the dock.

My Mr. Davis beamed. "Captain Andy! Didn't know you were still around."

They shook hands. Captain Andy, who stunk like he didn't dare use any of the water around us, said, "I'm here and I ain't got a party."

I said, "I'm taking Mr. Davis out."

"And for twenty dollars," this Mr. Davis added, still holding Captain Andy's meaty hand.

Scratching the stubble under his fat chin with his free paw, Andy said, "Now you know me, Mr. Davis. You always had luck on my boat. I know the fishing holes. I'll take you out for ten bucks."

"Mr. Davis, you'd have to spend another ten for insurance, if you took a chance on his scow," I said, pushing between them.

"Let's not have a brawl," Mr. Davis said, glaring at me. "I never said I was taking your boat, only going to look at her."

"Look, Mr. Davis, look good. Can you compare this broken-down hull to my cruiser?"

"That's a fact, Mr. Davis," Andy said over a belch. "You for some real fishing or a yachting trip? You can clean your fish on my decks and I don't give a hoot."

I knew I'd lost a customer even before Davis followed Andy aboard the crummy hull. Casting off, Captain Andy waved his fist at me. "Kondos, try any strong-arm stuff here and you'll end up sucking bottom water, you lousy Greek!"

As they headed out toward the breakwater, the rusty engine sounding and coughing exactly like a rusty engine, Kenny, who was standing a few feet away, said softly, "He's right, Cap Jim. The customer picks the boat he wants. That's the way it goes: win a pickle, lose a pickle."

"Shut up."

Kenny gave me his toothless

grin. "But I'll get you customers. I'll—"

"So you keep bulling me!" I snapped, kicking a dead spider crab off the dock as I walked toward my cruiser.

"Anyway, you've company aboard. A babe," Kenny said, following me.

"A woman?"

"She just come aboard and made herself right at home in your cabin. Real classy broad. Guess you won't be needing me any more today, Cap Jim. Can you spare a buck."

"Stop it."

"All I need is forty cents for a pint. I'm awful dry."

"I told you to lay off the juice. You know our deal. You don't get a dime unless I have a party."

"Yes sir, that's our deal," Kenny said gently. "About the wine, you've told me every day. And you're absolutely right. But I ain't got no sweet boat or no fine babe waiting for me. A man must have something, even drunken dreams. That's a fact, too, Cap Jim."

Jumping down on the polished deck, through the open cabin hatch I saw high heels, sheer stockings and a flash of good legs. She always had good legs. I tossed a half a buck at Kenny. Catching it, he started toward town.

"Be here first thing in the morning, Cap Jim, see if I can hustle us a party. You can count on me. I'll scout the bars for—"

Walking down into the cabin, I smelled her perfume before I saw the rest of her sprawled on a red cushioned berth. As always, she reminded me of a sleek cat.

"Hello Anna. Slumming?"

"Don't be nasty, Jim. I didn't have to leave 'Frisco to see slums. You're looking fit, so hard and . . . so much a man."

"Okay, what do you want? Need my signature for—"

"I need much more than your signature," she said, sitting up, holding out her arms. "Jim, darling, I need *you.*"

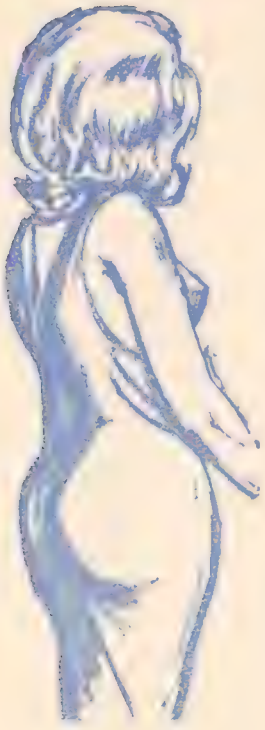
ANNA was sitting on the side of the bunk as bright spotlights of sun shot through the portholes. "Jim, I can't make it without you. If you've been waiting to hear me admit that, I've said it!"

"Honey, I wasn't leaving you, only our crooked way of living. Anna, stay with me on the boat?"

"Daddy always said you were the best CPA he ever knew, with a mind like a computer and all you can think about is living on this creepy boat like—like a jerky sea scout!"

"Yeah, I was the jerk smart enough to marry the boss' daughter."

Her red lips flew open, as if with pain. "When he died, you took over and built the business larger than ever, on your own. The . . . You bastard, was that all I meant to you, being the boss' daughter?"



Anna began to weep.

It was my morning to be called names. "Aw, hon, I didn't mean that."

"Jim, can't you come home? That Internal Revenue agent they arrested for having his hand out, he never mentioned you."

"Look, I was fed up long before his arrest. But it was the thought of my going to jail, simply because some rich chislers didn't—"

"But you *didn't* go to jail. Your name never came up?"

"Anna, not one joker in ten making over a hundred-thousand dollars yearly pays his rightful tax. And they don't need their own brains to do the actual cheating—they merely hire clowns like me, expecting an accountant to rook Uncle Sam for them. I'm sick of all that junk."

"But Jim, other tax accountants do it. You didn't invent the idea?"

"The upper bracket guy can *easily* afford to pay his way, his full tax. Why should I be the flunky helping him rob our government?"

"You sound so damn noble, I'll —Oh Jim, why are we fighting? I thought we were happy, really had it made. But a boat! What's so wonderful living in this cabin? Can you compare it to our ranch house?"

"Anna, all I know is, I find it a cleaner way of living."

"Some living, tied up to a stinking dock! You sound simple!"

"Anna, I gave you the house, the cars, the tax-free city bonds, my investment portfolio, the forty-two thousand dollars stashed in the vault box. Enjoy them."

"You high-minded phony! When you bought the boat, didn't you start the charter angle, as a tax dodge? And the twenty grand you paid for the boat—where did that come from? Did you buy it with trading stamps?"

"Anna, why rehash all this? A man has to live the way he sees fit."

"And what about a woman? What sort of life would I have? Lucky me, cooking hamburgers all day for a bunch of fishing drunks! Jim, come back!"

I had no answer for that: all I knew was I wanted to live on the boat, forget consolidating other peoples' debts, hiding their true worth.

"Hon, give me a break; live on the boat with me for a year? After that, we'll see."

Shaking her blonde hair, Anna started to dress. "I have a better idea. Let's spend a year in Europe. You can paint. Then we'll come home and reopen the office."

"Painting is only my hobby, not my answer. I think I can make a go of the charter boat business."

"Jim, perhaps I'm being selfish, maybe we both are, but I can't wait forever for you to straighten out. I'll wait one more month; then I start divorce proceedings."

I felt like I'd stopped one below the belt, although I'd always known divorce was the logical ending. But to actually hear her say it, hurt.

"Jim, haven't you anything to say?"

"You said it all."

Anna ran up to the deck. I lay on the bunk, hearing the sound of her high heels die on the deck.

A mournful sound, indeed.

I WAS UP with the sun, freshened the bait, then stood around like a fool, watching the other charter boats take off with parties. Kenny hadn't shown and as I cursed him for being rummy, two beefy guys said they'd give me ten bucks to go out until noon. They started nibbling at a bottle and by the time we were outside the breakwater, they were both sick.

I headed back but they vomited all over the cockpit before I threw them off on the dock, gave them back one of their ten dollar bills. They wanted the other ten and it ended by my poking the bigger one in the gut. They staggered off, saying they'd call the police.

Kenny came sailing along the dock as I was cleaning up, wondering if they would go to the cops. One complaint about rough stuff and the police chased you from the public dock.

Kenney looked terrible, his weatherbeaten skin pasty, bloodshot eyes narrowed to slits, licking his dry lips, hands shaking. I said, "I see you tied on a big one last night. You're fired!"

"Now, Cap Jim, don't get up steam. Sure I was crocked, but I did it hustling for you. Mr. Anderson been here?"

"Get lost, Kenny." I washed the mop over the side.

"I got us a real live one; none of these two-bit fishing buffs. Mr. Anderson wants to charter the boat for a week, maybe two! Cap Jim, he's stuffed with money. He was sitting 'em up all night."

"On top of which pink elephant?"

"No sir, he's for real. Said he'd be down to talk with you this morning. Must be sleeping one off his-

self. He can throw his head back."

"Stop snowing me and get out of here."

Kenny leaned over, blew out a stale whiskey breath. "Smell the whiskey, Cap Jim? You know I can't afford no hard stuff. He'll be along. Listen, my legs ain't so good today. Okay if I come aboard and stretch out?"

"Okay." He had the shakes bad. "But if he doesn't show, you're done."

"He'll show. I know a big spender." Kenny jumped down into the cockpit, legs doing a comical dance. But he didn't fall. Stretching out on a seat on the shady side, Kenny closed his eyes. "Jim, I wouldn't ask except I'm real miserable: got a brew handy? My guts are doing a twist."

Tossing him a can, Kenny gulped it down, belched, slid off into a contented sleep. For a second I almost wished I could lose myself in the bottle, instead of worrying all the time about Anna, money, the police. Taking a rag, I dived in for a swim and to wash down the hull.

From the water I saw a cab stop at the dock's end. The man walking toward my boat wore a loud sport shirt and neat silk slacks, sun glasses and Italian styled shoes. If they weren't in the best taste, neither could you pick 'em up in a bargain basement. Tall and lean with brush-cut red hair, he looked about forty; an over-handsome cat with a sharp nose and an almost feminine mouth, large and weak. Smoking a thick cigar, he walked with a kind of practiced stride, like an English soldier on parade.

Despite being bloodshot, his eyes were hard and alert. As I climbed out of the water he asked in a deep voice, "Captain around, boy?"

"I'm the captain."

Running his eyes over me, he said, "I'm Henry Anderson from Chicago." He held out a slim, manicured hand, lots of hair on the back of his fingers, all neatly curled as if combed and very dark. The red on his noggin had to be a dye job.

"Jim Kondos," I said, shaking hands.

He put his glasses on again. "Nice little schooner you have."

I laughed. "A schooner has masts, sails. This is a cabin cruiser."

"I don't know a damn thing about ships. Plastics is my business. But some day I plan to manufacture plastic hulls. Fat dollar in that. Admiral, here's what I have in mind: I'm on my first real vacation from the old grindstone, living it up. I'd like to hire your sloop for two weeks for some fishing and cruising off the coast of Lower California."

"Baja California? The Mexican end of the peninsula?"

Anderson flipped cigar ash on the dock, a fast, graceful motion of his wrist. "I suppose so. I don't

have any set place in mind, merely sail south for a week, stopping where we feel like it, then head back. Be something for me to talk about at the Rotary luncheons back home."

He saw Kenny sleeping in the cockpit. "There's my guzzling pal! Funny about a lush; their blood's so saturated with alcohol, a few drinks of one hundred proof booze and they pass out."

"Yes. Mr. Anderson, by two weeks do you mean fourteen days?"

Nodding, he blew out a neat smoke ring. "What will the tab run?"

"I usually charge seventy-five dollars per day, but for a long charter I'll make it fifty dollars per, including food and Kenny as crew. That will be seven hundred and fifty dollars. Fuel is extra."

"I'm too hungover for such technical chatter. Will a thousand dollars cover it?"

I hesitated, only because I couldn't believe my good luck.

"Kondos, I'll make it one thousand two-hundred dollars. That's a firm offer."

"Agreed. When do you wish to leave, Mr. Anderson?"

"I've some unfinished business with a swinging blonde dish tonight. Make it tomorrow morning."

"Fine. I'll be ready to shove off at six."

He laughed, startling shrill laughter in contrast to the deep voice. "Man, I'll just be going to bed by then. Remember, I'm on vacation. I'll be here sometime before noon."

"Sure. Have you done much fishing, Mr. Anderson?"

"Not since I was a kid. Hustling too hard; never a spare minute. My partner and I grossed a quarter of a million last year."

"I'll need a binder; use it for gas."

"Of course." Pulling out a thick wallet, he gave me two fifty dollar bills. "Okay for openers? Give you the balance when I come aboard tomorrow."

"That will be fine, Mr. Anderson. I'll write out a receipt."

"Forget it. I'll send my luggage down later today."

We shook hands again and he started down the dock. The slim, fast hands, the bulky wallet—he looked more a gambler than a business executive. Shaking Kenny awake, I told him about leaving for a two-week charter. Looking around wildly, Kenny ran along the deck, the floppy, disjointed way he moved.

"Mr. Anderson!" he shouted. "Hey, Mr. Anderson!"

Anderson stopped and I heard Kenny ask, "Going to bar-hop again tonight, Mr. Anderson? I know a little Mex joint with white rum that melts your teeth and gals to warm the rest of you. We'll have a hell of a party."

Anderson slapped him on the

back, said something I couldn't hear. When Kenny stumbled back to the boat he gave me a proud grin. "Cap Jim, when I say a man'll show, he shows!"

"We have work to do. We'll check the engines. Later you'll take her over to the marina dock for fuel. I'll see about food."

"Yes sir. One more brew would steady me up just fine."

"Get one out of the refrigerator," I told him, so excited I could sing. The nine hundred dollars I'd clear would keep me going for months. The hell with twenty-buck fishing parties; this was the type of charter I wanted.

We had things shipshape by two. Kenny took the boat over to be gassed, fill the water tanks and pick up fresh bait. In town I stocked up on food and charts. I'd never been out of the country before and stopped at the Coast Guard office to see what sort of clearance papers I'd need.

Taking the food back to the marina dock by cab, where Kenny was waiting, I cleaned out my checking account paying for gas. When we returned to our dock, a taxi was waiting with Anderson's luggage: two expensive suitcases, a case of champagne and half a case of scotch. I was impressed.

Kenny took off at six. I told him to sleep on board and he said he'd be back during the night. After studying the charts, I felt too good to sit around. Taking my sketch pad, I tried capturing the gulls diving for fish heads, but the action was too fast for my pencil.

The night was warm and I slept in the cockpit. At five I took a swim and shaved. The sky was clear and the radio reported fair and sunny weather, with a ten mile offshore wind. It would be choppy. I saw small whitecaps dancing outside the breakwater.

Making myself an old-fashioned egg and pancake breakfast, I cursed Kenny. By eight I was fit to be tied. I had no idea where Kenny bunked or if he even had a room. At nine-thirty Anderson stepped out of a cab, sporting a corny new yachting cap, gray knit sport shirt and matching slacks.

I'd fixed up the forward cabin for him and he changed to swim trunks: he wasn't as muscular as I'd thought. If his chest was hairless, the hairy fingers still seemed carefully brushed. Sitting in the cockpit, hungover, he puffed on a cigar, nipped scotch from a pigskin flask large as a camera case.

After a while he asked, "Jim, what are we waiting for?"

"Kenny hasn't shown. I'm sure he'll be along any minute."

"I left him in some dive last night about eleven, stoned out of his silly mind. Said he was coming back here. I'm on the fuzzy side myself. Where's the can?"

"Forward, the narrow door between the cabins."

Anderson returned to the cock-

pit, examined the fishing chair, asked if I wanted champagne. Opening a bottle for him, I took a small drink. "Take it slow on the bubble water, Mr. Anderson; it will be choppy out there."

"I've a cast iron gut, Jim. And stop the Mister Anderson line, call me Hank. We've some business to settle."

He went down to his cabin, came

back with a check for $1100. It was an Anderson Plastic Inc. check, on a Chicago bank, meaning it would take ten days to clear. No doubt, at tax time, the charter would be written off as a "business expense."

"A check okay, Jim? I'll need my cash for doing the Mexican towns. I can show you credit cards for identification."

"A check is fine," I said. I ducked down to the cabin, made out a deposit slip: if I mailed the check in it would clear by the time I was back.

Coming up into the cockpit again, I saw a police car at the dock entrance. I told Hank, "I'll ask around for Kenny."

Walking toward the squad car, I wondered if the slob I'd belted yesterday had made a complaint. That would be all I'd need now. A young cop called from the car, "Aren't you Captain Jim Kondos?"

I nodded, my guts turning over.

"You have a rummy called Kenny York working for you?"

"Yes. I'm waiting for him now."

"Don't wait, he's in the hospital. We found him unconscious early this morning, slugged. He has a bad concussion. He got any folks?"

"I don't know, Kenny only worked for me when I had a party. What happened to him?"

"Who knows what happens to a rumdum? Happy fishing," the cop added and drove off.

I mailed the check and walked slowly back to the *Capital Gains*. Captain Andy's tub was still tied up but I'd be damned if I'd take him. I told Anderson, "Kenny's in the hospital."

"Hit by a car? He was in rough shape last night."

"The police say he was rolled. Look, I don't know anybody else I can hire."

"Can you run this yawl single-handed, Jim?"

"Sure. But when fishing you need somebody to have bait ready and you're paying for a crew of two."

"I'm paying and I'm not kicking. Let's stop wasting time and go-go. If you think it's safe. I hate delays."

"We'll be safe enough."

I untied the bow rope and let the engines idle as I got the stern rope in, headed for the breakwater. Once we passed that, I kept the speed down to eight knots so we wouldn't bounce much.

Sitting in the fishing chair, smoking his cigar and drinking champagne, Hank called up, "This is real living. Can you get more speed?"

I gave her full gas and two miles offshore turned south. We'd make Ensenada, some two hundred miles away, by late afternoon. Hank was an interesting character. When I asked if he wanted to put a line over, he told me, "Naw, the first day out, let's cut water. A small boat on the ocean is like leaving the world behind, all the dirt and crap, stepping into something clean."

"Exactly the way I feel."

Hank came up on the flying bridge with his bottle. I was amazed that he wasn't sick: we were rocking quite a bit. Glancing at the chart I told him we were passing Tijuana, which was inland, of course. Hank was a talker and between knocking off the fizz-water, he told me about gambling in Havana, Monte Carlo, Tangiers, the various brothels he'd visited and I wondered when he'd had time for his plastic factory.

At two, when he said he was hungry, I let him take the wheel while I went below to make roast beef sandwiches. There weren't any boats in sight, nor rocks or sandbars on the chart. But I kept my eyes on the wake, from the galley. Hank kept it straight as an arrow and I remembered his asking if I could run the boat "single-handed," that he'd been about to say "head" instead of can: I doubted that he'd never been on a boat before.

There was a phony side to Hank Anderson, but who hasn't one? There was $1100 in my bank, a strong boat under me, a salty breeze in my face, so I really was at peace with the world, free of worries.

BAJA CALIFORNIA is a rugged peninsula, barren and gloomy mountains rising sharply above narrow coastal plains. We didn't pass a single boat. Except for a jet liner flashing high overhead, I felt like an explorer. Ensenada, therefore, was a delightful surprise; a splendid horseshoe-shaped harbor with many boats at the docks, all fronting a fairly large and modern-looking city full of pretty hotels.

There were several hours of daylight left and I told Hank it would be a good time to fish, but he shook his head. When we docked a smartly dressed Mexican customs officer came aboard.

His English wasn't much and my Spanish less, but after we bought two tourist visas and Hank broke out a new bottle of champagne, we got along fine. Then I put together

steaks and french fries for supper.

Hank took a fast swim while I did the dishes, then dressed and told me, "Come on, Jim, let's see what swings here. Looks hot."

"I don't like leaving the boat alone," I said, wishing Kenny was along. "I can lock the hatches, but in these poor countries we might return to find the dinghy gone, rope, outriggers, anything not tied down."

"Sure, you have to protect your bread. While I hate doing a town solo, this burg looks too hot to miss." He took off.

Turning on the radio, listening to the soft Mexican music, I felt great. This was the longest day's cruising I'd ever clocked on my boat. I cleaned the deck and walked around the dock, admiring the red ball of sinking sun but far too lazy to take out my oils. There were many charter boats tied up; the going price was two bucks worth of pesos per man.

I was astonished to see Hank on the dock, arms full of bundles. He'd bought a twin lung Scuba outfit, said he always wanted to try skin diving. Then he rushed off again, telling me, "Jim, this town really jumps."

The night was warm with only a few mosquitos and I decided to sleep in the cockpit. I dozed off, thinking this was the way to build up a high class trade, Anderson would tell his friends and—too bad he lived so far away, in Chicago. And ten days for his check to clear.

I was awakened by sounds of drunken laughter. Hank was staggering along the dock with four giggling girls. In the dim light I saw his sweating face, the phony red hair like an orange beret. The dark, runty girls in loud dresses, smelt of sweat, cheap perfume and whiskey. The laughter stopped to the sound of running footsteps.

Three men came slowly along the dock, all of them stocky with slicked-down black hair under straw hats pushed far back on their heads, shirts and pants stained with sweat.

There was a great outburst of fast Spanish from the girls and the men. I gathered the men knew Hank had paid off the girls and the men were pimps, wanted the money. Hank stood in the middle of all this, swaying slightly. Suddenly Hank rattled off shrill and rapid Spanish.

Wearing only my shorts, I jumped onto the dock, asked Hank, "What the hell's going on?"

"Since you couldn't come to town, Jim, I was bringing the town to you, ole buddy. But now we have a situation, or something."

One of the girls burst into tears and a guy tried to slap her. I pushed him away. He touched his hip pocket and I saw the flash of a knife in the moonlight. Almost in reflex action I feinted with my right, dumped him with a left hook on his wide chin. He dropped the

knife as he fell. A second hero came charging at me, into a solid right to his gut: sounding like I'd banged a drum. He twisted to the dock, moaning.

The third joker didn't move. Hank picked up the knife and hurled it in a silver flash at the man's worn leather sandals. Hank was lucky, the blade stuck between the man's stubby toes, nailing him to the deck.

"What are you going to do with these girls now, Hank?"

"I'm going to sleep. You can have 'em."

"I don't want them."

"Okay, I'll tell 'em to blow." He made a short speech in Spanish and the women shrugged, walked off the dock, stepping over their pimps. I watched them go and when I turned toward the boat, I saw Hank asleep on my bunk, below. The men were still groaning and cursing. I untied the *Capital Gains,* took it out a few hundred feet and threw over the anchor.

I went back to sleep, awakening several times during the night to check the anchor. When I awoke at eight the sun was out strong, the dock was empty and Hank was still snoring. I dived over for a cautious swim—we were in shark waters—then made breakfast in the cockpit and waited for Hank to get up.

He came out of the cabin around noon, looking awful and smelling worse. Yawning, he said, "Nice bit of action last night. Kenny told me you'd been a pug, but I didn't believe him."

"I worked my way through college as a pro boxer. I was never more than a pork and beaner. Why didn't you speak Spanish to the Customs man yesterday?"

Hank shrugged. "Why let him know I speak the lingo? This way I hold the edge. I picked up some in high school, took a course last year, thought we'd try to crack the South American plastic market."

"What do you want to do now, go fishing?"

Shaking his head and belching he said, "First I want a beer and some orange juice. Then—" He glanced at the chart I'd tacked above the compass box. "Let's keep going. Rosario seems the next large town. You ever been there, Jim?"

"No."

"Neither have I. Looks about one hundred fifty miles away. We'll see what the action is there. But first I'm going ashore, after I change, phone Chicago. I've been out of touch with my office for a week now."

Hank took a fast swim. I made breakfast. After we ate, I pulled up to the front of the dock and used most of my cash filling the gas tanks, Hank talking to the gas attendant in Spanish. I was afraid to take on any drinking water.

When Hank left I aired the cabins. The smell of gas was heavy. I took the boat out to the other end

of the dock, still smelling gas. My fuel lines checked out okay. I pumped out the bilge and the gas odor was stronger: the bilge blowers weren't working. I tried to repair them but I wasn't that much of a mechanic.

Hank returned, chewing hard on a dark cigar. "These lousy Mexican phones! I couldn't reach my office. Impossible nobody's there. I'll try calling again from Rosario."

I wanted to spend the day in Ensenada, have the bilge blowers fixed. "Hank, this place is famous for its fishing. Why not go fishing from the dink, or try skin diving, tie up here again for the night?"

"Jim, I'm always restless when I'm hanging. Let's cut out."

"Okay." I didn't want to tell him the blowers weren't working.

We left Ensenada, passing swarthy men fishing from open boats with nets, the way my old man did, seeing a few charter boats and some fairly new cruisers carrying white faces.

Hank slept on the cockpit bunk while I kept the motors at half speed to save gas and cut the fumes. Once, from the bridge I watched flying fish desperately skimming over the water, shouted down, "Hank, if you want to try for game fish, something large is chasing a school of flying fish on the port side."

"Jim, I had a big night. Stop bugging me about fish; I need sleep."

He was paying. I let him sleep. The Pacific was a deep blue, the sky hot and clear. After an hour there wasn't a boat in sight. I had the sea to myself, which is the way I like it. This was true adventure, for sure.

While Hank was pounding his ear I tied the wheel down, pumped the bilge and raised the boards to air the damn gas fumes. We entered Rosario at about 5 p.m. It was another natural harbor but far smaller than Ensenada, the one dock falling apart.

The town looked dull and shabby, like something out of an old Western movie. Back of the wooden shacks and stores the acrid land seemed bleak and flat. The only interesting spot was a small island a half mile out in the harbor. This was about three hundred feet in diameter. Among the tall coconut palms waving at the blue sky from the rim of the narrow beach, I caught a glimpse of a modernistic bungalow. Probably the hideout of some USA playboy.

On docking, Hank rushed into town to phone Chicago. There was a single gas pump station across from the dock and I asked the old man running it if he was a mechanic. I couldn't have Hank ask him, in Spanish, so I returned to my boat and opened the bilge, was nearly kayoed by the fumes.

I fooled with the blowers and then gave it up when I noticed movement on the narrow beach of the little isle. I thought I was seeing

a nude Mexican gal standing on a red blotch.

Using binoculars, I saw this tall girl in a scrimpy pink bikini, which was lost against the rich tan of her skin. She was standing before an easel and the red blotch was a beach towel. She looked about twenty-two, with a long, dark pony tail down her back—interesting face, remarkable bosom and strong legs holding the most perfect hips I'd ever seen. I couldn't make out the canvas, but it was full of odd colors.

Anchoring the *Capital Gains* a few hundred feet from the dock, I locked the cabin, grabbed my sketch pad and rowed the dink toward the islet like a man chasing a dream.

The girl was so intent on the vivid seascape she was painting, she never looked in my direction. On closer inspection she not only had this barbershop calendar figure, but her large, very dark eyes held an exotic, Oriental slant while the lips were a heavy red against the golden face. If she'd been standing under the same palms a few thousand miles due west, she would have been the perfect Polynesian beauty.

While I was too far away to get a good look at the canvas, the colors were hard and sharp and she painted with sure strokes. Pulling in the oars, I took my pad and started to rough the scene in. There wasn't much tide movement but I was being gently carried ashore. I was some twenty feet away when she glanced up, saw me. I gave her a big grin.

There was this flash of tan arms and hips as she bent down, then spun around, throwing a carbine on me. In very cold and good English she said, "Go away! This is private property. Leave immediately or I fire!"

I held up my pad. "I'm merely sketching you. I like your feeling for color, the sure way you—"

The rifle belched orange and my pad jumped out of my hand, a blackened bullet hole smack in its center. I put my back to the oars, racing for my cruiser, facing her as I rowed. She stood still as a golden statue, carbine to her pretty shoulder. If I didn't understand her shooting at me, neither was I going to argue with a crack shot!

As I neared the cruiser Hank called from the dock, "Why the hell did you move out, Jim? I've been sweating here for fifteen minutes."

I rowed the dink in and Hank jumped aboard without hesitation. Once on the boat he quickly changed to swim trunks and dove over. Coming up the ladder, his red head still bright in the growing twilight, he said, "I thought I was in an oven back in that damn phone booth. I don't know what to think, still can't raise anybody in my office."

"Hank, it's about six-thirty here,

meaning it's almost ten back in Chicago. Your office is shut for the night."

Laughing, he said, "How stupid can I get? But when I phoned from Ensenada, it should have been about four in Chicago!"

"As you said before, phone connections from this part of Mexico aren't the best. Don't worry."

"Yeah. You ever do any skin diving, Jim?"

"I'm no expert, but I've done a little Scuba work."

"Good. Show me how this aqualung works."

The tanks had air and I showed Hank how to breathe through the valve, then went over the side with him. We were in fifteen feet and as it was growing dark, I told him not to go down more than a few feet. We horsed around, then climbed aboard and I showed him how to rinse the flutter valves with fresh water. Hank said, "This Scuba bit's a kick. Where do I get oxygen to refill the tanks?"

"Oxygen would burn your lungs out. You use ordinary air. That gas station beyond the dock should have an air compressor."

I cooked up thick hamburgers, boiled frozen corn ears and made a large salad. We ate in the cockpit, listening to the local radio music. I saw a light in the snappy bungalow on the island, wondered again about the pretty gun-slinger. When I asked Hank if he was going ashore he said, "After last night

my batteries need recharging. I'm hitting the sack early."

It was a good night for sleeping, a cool breeze blowing in from the sea. We were in our bunks by ten. I dozed off, still seeing those trim hips with a motion all their own. The islet undoubtedly belonged to some wealthy Mexican with the girl his daughter or wife and afraid of Gringos like me. In that nothing-less bikini, serving up her delightful curves like sensuous hors d'oeuvres, she needed to be a crack shot.

I opened my eyes at seven to a clear, wash-blue sky, promising another good day. The coffee aroma awoke Hank. After he'd shaved and had breakfast, he said he was going to try to call his partner in Chicago.

"It's only about nine in Chicago now. Like to get in an hour's fishing first?"

"Okay, I might as well, to say I did. Can we fish from here?"

"Yes. But you won't get anything big."

I was wrong. No sooner had I baited a line for Hank when he reeled in a gray-brown eel, long and thick as my arm. Handing me the rod, Hank said with disgust, "Get that damn thing off the hook and throw it away! Let me get to a phone and stop this nonsense."

Soon as Hank left I began tinkering with the bilge blowers. I heard an outboard come along side, looked up, all sweaty and dirty, to see the golden girl from the island standing in a sturdy, planked skiff. She was a picture of cool beauty in a wrap-around blue skirt and a clinging royal blue polo shirt displaying her fine bosom. With a flashing smile she asked, "May I come aboard?"

"You bet," I said, wiping my hands on my chest, tieing her bow rope to a stern cleat, helping her into the cockpit. She smelt clean and cool. Looking around, I clowned, "Where's your rifle?"

The rich tan face blushed. "I'm here to apologize for yesterday. The local folks stay away from our island, but sometimes men off visiting boats—well, they assume we 'native' girls are enchanted by them and they often become pests. You were only sketching from your dink and I had no right to shoot. I'm Delores Mino."

"Jim Kondos," I said, shaking the slim brown hand.

"Quite a boat, very roomy. Are you cruising, Jim?"

"Not exactly," I said, replacing the bilge boards. "I'm a charter boat captain, carrying a client on a fishing trip."

"An artist-captain—that's an interesting combination."

"Delores, I merely doodle with a charcoal stick. But you have a marvelous sense of color."

Those soft eyes studied me. "I'm on a sort of abstract kick, painting things the opposite color of what they actually are. If the Pacific is a turquoise blue, I'll paint it a lobster red, or any color which comes to mind. Oh, I know it's nutty. Art should be a means of communication and this is selfish, something only I understand. I often think I've been alone too much and—"

"You live alone on that islet?"

"No, with my father, a former government official, but he's completely wrapped up in the past. I'm not complaining: I swim, paint, fish, listen to my records, read, sleep a lot."

"A beauty like yourself must be fighting off men."

Delores tossed her pretty head back and laughed, a throaty, sad sound. "On the contrary. My father was high up in the government, which makes me taboo to the Rosario men. I don't want to sound

like a snob, but having been educated in Paris and Rome, I've little in common with the local men or women. That's truly a horribly smug statement, so let me shut up. Can I see your boat, Jim?"

I showed her the cabins. She was interested in a water color of mine hanging over a berth, casually told me several of her oils were in minor museums. Then we had beers in the cockpit, talked fishing, Picasso, Evergood, boats, Duke Ellington, Jackson Pollock, Acapulco, Peggy Lee, Cassius Clay, Hemingway and Renoir.

When she was off in a deep "art" discussion I couldn't keep pace with her—and most of the time I was sure I was dreaming. It didn't seem possible the most sophisticated girl I'd ever met was also a striking beauty and lonely on a tropical paradise isle of her own!

Glancing at her gold wrist watch, she jumped to her feet. "Time for Poppa's lunch. Jim, your rugged facial planes intrigue me. I'd love to do your portrait. You're welcome on our island, anytime you wish."

"Thanks, but I don't know how long I'll stay in Rosario. That's up to my client."

"As a fisherman he'll find plenty of action here."

"He isn't a real fishing buff, merely a guy who's made some money in plastics and—"

"That's the man with the odd red hair? Are you leaving today?"

"That's up to him; he's paying. But you can be sure of one thing: I'll return soon, perhaps alone."

Delores smiled and held out her hand. "You're always welcome, Jim."

Pulling her to me, I kissed the lush lips—hard. For a second her lips pressed mine; then, pushing me away, she fingered my busted nose.

"I don't think we're ready for that," she said calmly.

"Delores, that wasn't any passing sailor's kiss."

Her wonderful eyes twinkled. "I know it wasn't. Good day, Jim."

Pulling in her skiff, I saw a flash of long legs as she jumped in. Starting the outboard, she stared at me for a long second, red lips a warm smile, then she headed for her island. I stared after her until she'd beached the boat, disappeared among tall palms.

Falling into my fishing chair, I wanted to shout at my good luck. *Let Anna get her divorce!* With Delores and her island, my boat, what more could a man ask of life?

Yet under my high feeling there was this vague worry about Anna. Anna was a chick who could take care of herself, would have little trouble finding another husband.

But Anna was also a ten-year habit and somehow hard to shake, even if she stood for the dull office routine. Delores meant waving palms, an island, true adventure, —a lush beauty waiting to explode

with passion in the arms of the right man. Delores . . . truly paradise—

I saw Hank walking along the dock, walking fast, sweating, face pale and tense. He boarded the boat, sat in the cockpit, holding his head in his hairy hands. I waited for him to speak. Staring wildly as if seeing me for the first time.

He suddenly said, "Know why I couldn't reach the factory? It burnt down yesterday morning! I finally got my partner on the phone, in his house. I'm away for a few days and that inefficient son ruins me!"

"Your entire plant burnt down?"

He nodded. "That isn't the worst part. He let our insurance lapse last week!"

"That's not possible! Any insurance broker would—"

"Our insurance man called us. Before I left I even made out a check for my partner to co-sign. But he forgot, probably so busy golfing and goofing off once I was gone, that—Jim, I'm flat broke! The check I gave you will bounce higher than a rocket. My idiot partner even burned up cash he never got around to depositing! Oh God, I'm busted!"

I tried to swallow. I had less than forty dollars on me, all the money I had in this crazy world.

I HEARD myself ask, "Hank, how could you write a check against money you didn't have?"

"You're an accountant; you know how it works. We were making it in plastics, but starting on a shoe string. We put every cent back into the plant as we expanded. Sure, I had a couple of grand in my personal account, but I took that out for my vacation. My dumb partner was supposed to deposit half of a five thousand dollar cash deal we'd landed, in my account—that was the money which went up in smoke. Now, I haven't a factory or anything."

"How much cash have you left in your wallet?"

"About seventy dollars. I blew a big bundle in Ensenada. Jim, I'll give you that and we'll head back to the States. I'm sorry."

"They don't cash sorry checks! I'm in a money bind myself, was counting on this charter."

Hank stood up. "You're one hundred per cent right. My troubles don't concern you, Jim; let me look around, try to work out something for you."

"Look around where? You going to find me a two-bit charter here in Rosario, or compete with the ten peso boats in Ensenado?" I snapped.

"Jim, give me the rest of the day. Hell, all we have is time. You've a good boat and I'm a born salesman. You can sleep six, maybe ten in a pinch. I saw Yankee tourists in town: suppose I get ten guys to pay fifty dollars each for a fishing trip back to the States? We can do it in two days and at least you'll have

five hundred dollars. If you're thinking I'm trying to run out on you, forget it. Being broke in a foreign country is a lousy deal, so—"

"Hank, your company must have some assets, accounts receivable."

He touched the hairs on the back of his left hand nervously. "Yeah, there's money due us, but that will take time and I can't do it from here. Jim, once we're in the States, you fly back to Chicago with me and I'll do everything possible to square that eleven hundred dollar hunk of rubber I gave you. Now, let me get to town, see what I can hustle up."

"Do what you want, but you're wasting time."

He made a couple of sandwiches, held up the last scotch bottle. "Relax with a drink. My brains always work better when oiled. Hell, at least we won't go hungry. There's plenty of chow in the freezer."

I shook my head; a drink wouldn't relax me. I was stranded. Returning to the States broke meant either going back to Anna or borrowing on the boat. My old man always said, "Borrow against your boat and you're sinking her for sure. It's as bad as putting your wife on the street."

Pulling out his wallet, Hank said, "I've seventy-six dollars. I'll keep five bucks. You take the rest, as proof I'm not trying to job you."

I took the money and he went to

town. Checking the fuel tanks, I had enough gas to get us to the States, with the seventy one dollars. I was going to have Hank cash checks for me, to pay for the fuel on the cruise. Hank had said something about credit cards—we could use them. I felt so lousy I pulled in the dink, hoping rowing would relax me.

I kept away from Delores' islet, although it was a comforting sight: she seemed my ace in the hole. Nor was I rushing things: I'd fallen for her on first sight and I could still remember how her lips had answered mine, for a second.

Only I didn't want to come to her broke. But bringing a $20,000 boat wasn't exactly coming in empty-handed. Still, if Anna

started her divorce action at the end of the month, it would take time before I was free and I had to eat during those months.

Rowing like a lunatic racer, I cursed Anderson. But a calmer part of my numbed brain said it was a hell of a coincidence of his factory burning, his partner allowing their insurance to lapse—all while his check was clearing through my bank. Still, in my years of balancing books I'd come across even more childish mistakes made by bigger executives.

Bushed, I beached the dink and took a swim, then stretched out on the warm sand, watching a boy ride an old horse into the sea, wash it off. The stretch of sand was south of the dock and when a battered old Ford stopped near the dock, I was astonished to see Hank at the wheel. He stared at the *Capital Gains* for a second, then drove off. He was checking to see if I'd hauled anchor, left him in Rosario. But where did Hank get the heap from? Was the slick bastard holding out money on me?

I could long distance a credit office I'd often used, in 'Frisco, check on whether there ever was an Anderson Plastics company. But that would cost a dozen dollars and whether Hank was a phony didn't matter now. His bouncing check would be answer enough.

Rowing back to the boat, I had a snack and fooled with the bilge blowers again. They seemed a simple enough mechanism, but like everything else, I couldn't make the damn things work. I went through Anderson's things, finding only expensive shirts and a circular about a new and faster injection mold for plastics. Returning to the cockpit, I had a beer and sat there in a daze.

"Jim, boy! You're going to make a fast two grand!"

I snapped out of my mental fog as Hank stepped aboard. He seemed both cocky and cheerful as he opened a beer, sat opposite me.

"I got us a job paying four grand! We'll split. I'll need a stake to get started again. I told you I always land on my feet."

I stared at him without answering.

Throwing his beer can over, like a slob, Hank growled, "Don't play it so cool! The deal is, we take a man into the States."

"Some deal. I'd rather be starving on my boat than rooming in a Federal jail," I said.

"We'll be taking a small chance smuggling this guy in, but he isn't a criminal. Do you know who lives on that island out there? *Valez Mino.* Does that name ring any bells, Jim, boy?"

"Not a single chime."

"Fifteen months ago Dr. Mino president of Santingo, a South American country just below Mexico. It's small but no banana republic—it's rich in copper and tin.

Mino was an exile in Europe for years while Santingo was ruled by a bloody dictator. He was finally booted and Mino was called back to become the first reform president.

"Fifteen months ago Dr. Mino was toppled by Chu Boleres, one of these young fire-eaters. Mino and his daughter were allowed to leave the country.

"Now get the full picture, Jim, Mino really is a good guy. But he wasn't too smart, politically; he kept the former generals, the police chief. He ended up a prisoner in the presidential palace while these goons ruled with the same iron fist they'd used under the old dictator. Until Chu Boleres and his guerrillas swept down from the mountains, put them against a wall, took over." Hank Anderson stopped to relight his cigar.

"Washington thought highly of Dr. Mino, but Uncle Sam finds himself on a fence. Washington doesn't want to do anything to turn Chu into another Castro, which is why they won't allow, officially, Mino to enter the States."

"And how do you think we can smuggle him in?"

Hank grinned over a cloud of smoke. "A snap. You have me down as a passenger. When we return to the States Dr. Mino will shave his beard, pass as Hank Anderson. He speaks good English. It's that simple."

"And where in hell will you be all this time?" I asked, sarcastically.

"Under the boat. We'll screw a handle on the hull and I'll be holding on, wearing that aqualung. A charter boat leaves with two men, returns with two men.

Little chance of any official getting interested. Once you've docked, I'll be just another skin diver swimming toward the beach. No trouble."

"If Dr. Mino is picked up later, we'll be smack in the fan!"

"He'll claim he was flown across the border. We'll be in the clear. Once in the States he'll contact rich Santingo exiles who are sore at Chu for taking over their mines. Mino says they'll arrange for him to reach Canada, where he can operate without embarrassing Washington.

"The old man has a fixation about proving his reform program was never allowed to get off the ground, wants to make a deal with Chu for them both to run Santingo. Doc is nuts about clearing his name and four grand is all he can raise. From where I'm sitting, we're not hurting Uncle Sam or anybody else. Is it a deal?"

"What does Delores, his daughter, think of all this?"

Hank's weak mouth fell open with surprise. "How do you know her name?"

"She came over this morning to look at my boat."

"We're working for daddy, so what she thinks doesn't concern us.

From what he told me, daughter thinks he's too old to go back into politics again. But she's also anxious to clean the Mino name."

I thought things over. With Hank underwater there would be little chance of the Coast Guard, or anybody else, stopping us. With two grand I wouldn't have to crawl back to Anna. And since I'd be doing her poppa the big favor and Delores would be alone on the island, she'd be doubly happy to have me return."

"Jim, what's bothering you? What's there to think about?"

"I'm bothered that you're in Rosario less than twenty-four hours and you stumble on a deal like this. I don't believe in coincidences."

Puffing hard on his stinking cigar, Hank winked. "I told you I was a hustler. I heard about Dr. Mino while waiting to make my phone call this morning. Also, as I told you, we'd been trying to crack the South American plastic market, so I knew a little about him and Santingo.

"I—hell, I held out a few bucks on you, rented that old struggle-buggy standing at the end of the dock. I paid a kid to take a note out to the island, telling Mino we had a boat capable of bringing him to the States. I met the old boy and he jumped at the chance. I've set up a final meeting outside town. Since you're broke, I don't know why you're hesitating, Jim."

I didn't say anything and finally Hank said, "Don't sit there like a goddamn dummy! I'm taking the only real risk, holding on to the hull underwater, so—"

"You'd be pounded unconscious and once you let go, you'd be sucked back into the propellers, end up as hamburger for the fish. But it might work with you under the dink. We'll let it out on a longer rope so the prop backwash won't be too strong. You'll hold a trailing rope and—"

"Then you'll do it?"

"Yes. But I want to be paid in U.S. green before Dr. Mino steps aboard. His politics are his affair, but I'm risking my boat and jail."

"Great. When do I tell Mino we'll leave?"

"Tonight, soon as it's dark. Ask if there's a dock on the ocean side of the island. In the darkness we won't be able to see any rocks." I pointed to the tall, wooden spar buoy at the harbor entrance. "Better yet, have him be at the buoy. I'll flash our light three times and his daughter can bring him out in their skiff."

"Jim, come along with me, now, meet him."

"Stop it. I don't like leaving the boat alone."

"Dr. Mino wants to see you, as owner of the boat. We can anchor off the dock, lock the hatches. I'll get somebody to keep an eye on the boat, from the dock, for the hour or so we'll be gone. Come with me. We can settle things fast."

I put on a shirt and pants while Hank went to the gas station to fill the Scuba tanks. When he returned I had the boat secured. I dropped anchor thirty feet from the dock and when we rowed ashore, Hank went into a fast Spanish huddle with an old man who was fishing with a homemade pole. Pointing to the cruiser and our dink, Hank gave the man some pesos and a promise of more when we returned. The fisherman nodded with joy.

We drove north along the coast for a few miles in the ancient Ford, stopping at a little cantina facing the shore. Delores and an old man with a goatee, wearing a linen suit and Panama hat, were sipping drinks at a table. Their skiff was pulled up on the beach. Delores looked stunning in a chic pink blouse and tight white walking shorts.

She seemed sullen, playing with her glass, not even glancing up when Hank introduced me to Dr. Mino. The old man's intense face had sharp features, skin of coffee-colored wax. He was short and thin. Everything about him seemed very old, his age any place between sixty-five and eighty, except his eyes, which were clear and cautious.

Standing with military stiffness, he said in a surprisingly powerful voice, "Sir, do join me in a drink. I fully appreciate the risk you are taking on my behalf. True, you may be motivated by money, but I can not help but feel a desire for justice is also a reason for involving yourself. It is not only my honor which I must set right, but my beloved country is badly in need of my experience.

"Together, El Chu and I shall bring democracy to Santingo, right centuries of oppression. But enough of ideals. Let us come down to practical talk. My daughter informs me your boat is a good sea craft."

"She is, doctor." Delores still wouldn't look up at me. She kept staring at her tight shorts. I stared too.

"You'll find me an able sailor, even for an elderly man. Be assured, sir, your name shall go down in the glorious history of Santingo!"

Hank said quickly, "Doctor, there's one matter to be settled. Since you'll leave us, practically vanish, the moment we reach the States, the money must be paid, in full, before we start."

"Agreed. I shall hand you the four thousand dollars when I step aboard."

"Another matter," I said. "Please don't wire or phone your friends in the States that you're coming. It will be safer to contact them once you leave my boat, in the States."

He gave me a neat bow. "I fully understand. I am well skilled in underground work. At what time shall we meet and where, sir?"

Hank explained about his coming out to the boat on seeing our light, walked the little doctor across the road to point out the spar buoy.

Delores touched my knee with hers, under the table, whispered, "Jim, don't do this, go through with it. This is a trap to kill my father!"

I LEANED across the metal table. "Trap? Why should anybody want to kill your father? And who would do the killing?"

"For money, of course. Jim, how well do you know this Anderson?"

"Hank chartered my boat a few days ago and that was the first time I ever saw him. He's supposed to be in plastics. His factory just burnt down, which is why we were looking for a new charter." I was aware how confused I sounded.

"I know very little about you, Jim, yet somehow, I trust you. I must! Perhaps we artists are above petty intrigue. Although this is far from petty. Jim, I'm certain I've seen Anderson before, and in Santingo. I recall those hairy fingers, yet I'm not absolutely certain as to where I've seen him. It's driving me crazy.

"But I have this horribe hunch Anderson plans to take Poppa to Santingo, where there is a price of twenty-five thousand dollars on his head! Santingo is only eight hundred fifty miles down the coast, nothing for your boat."

"Delores, I don't quite know what you're talking about. But I can assure you of one thing—it's my boat. I'll take your father to the States and no place else. Anderson is a small timer. He doesn't count."

She sighed, the lovely dark eyes troubled. "Jim, that's all wrong, too. Clearing his name has become an obsession with Poppa. I don't object to his spending every peso we have, but it's dangerous and so useless. Father refuses to understand that his era is over. That he no longer—Here they come."

Hank and the doctor sat down. Mino told me, "Everything is arranged. Delores will bring me out to your boat when you flash your light. I shall carry a small bag with my personal papers, a change of clothing, and I will have the money. The venture can not fail."

Anderson clapped his hands for the waiter. "Let's drink to it."

I stood up. "You drink. Miss Mino wants me to look at her outboard propeller. It's been knocking. We'll be right back."

We crossed the road and the beach, my eyes on the neat sway to her hips. As we bent over the outboard I asked. "What were you saying about Santingo, Delores?"

"Chu, the president now, he knows Poppa was not responsible for the terror done in his name. But Poppa is no longer a man, he's a symbol—unhappily a symbol of all that was brutal under the old dictator. If he ever enters Santingo he'll be arrested, a great trial will

be held, for propaganda purposes, and the only end will be for him to face a firing squad. He can't seem to understand that."

"Honey, he's not going to Santingo, I run my boat. And if he wasn't responsible, I can see why he's anxious to clear his name."

"That's merely words, nonsense. Poppa is an old man, doesn't know the ways of modern revolution. The real guilty ones, the generals, the police officials he trusted, they're dead. Knowing their reputation under the dictator, he should have thrown them out when he took office, had them shot.

"They were all lice. But they were the sons of the leading families, Poppa's boyhood chums, and he used sentiment instead of sense. Jim, I'm trying to explain why Poppa would *have* to be found guilty, because he is the symbol of the old days, the cruel oppression. If only he would be content to remain here, live and die in peace!"

I toyed with the propeller. "Will he be in danger in the States?"

"No. He'll head a movement to overthrow Chu, which is impossible, the people are behind him. But the former mine owners, the elite, old men like Poppa, they never surrender their dreams of returning, of living off everybody else's misery and sweat. They'll use my father. Jim. Don't do it!"

"Delores, I can't back out now. Your father seems a highly intelligent man and clearing his name is important, to him. If he wants to reach the States so badly, let him. As for this being a trap, something Hank is pulling, forget it. I promise Dr. Mino will only be taken to the States."

"How I wish I could believe that."

"Do you think I'm lying? Delores, I'm in a spot and doing this for the money, but that doesn't make me a crook, a fink."

"Jim, I'd hardly have confided in you if I didn't trust you. I not only have this feeling of something happening to Poppa, but also to you."

Slapping the propeller hub, I stood up. "Honey, I can take care of myself, and of Hank. Will you be joining your father in the States?"

Delores shook her head, the pigtail doing a saucy dance down her back. "I shall remain here. His friends have little use for me. They belong in the dreary past when women were supposed to be dumb creatures, meant only for bed."

"Listen, Delores, when this is over, perhaps in a few weeks, or even sooner, I—well, I'd like you to do my portrait."

"But you'll be in the States?"

"Honey, I'll return for the sittings, if you're still interested."

"I'd like to do you full figure, nude, against the sea and—Jim, when Poppa has landed safely in the States, please cable me. Say, *interested in portrait.* That's all. I'll

know things have gone well. But I still have this strong premonition of danger."

"Delores, you'll get that cable tomorrow. Don't you worry."

"Anything wrong with the outboard?" Hank Anderson asked as we returned to the table.

"The shearing pin was working itself loose. It's okay now."

Dr. Mino got to his feet. "Delores and I will go to our house. I have much to make ready."

We shook hands all around, helped push their skiff in. As Hank and I drove back to the dock I asked casually, "Have you ever been to this Santingo? What's it like?"

"Never saw it. You been there, Jim?"

I shook my head. At the dock, after we'd paid off our fisherman-boat watcher, Hank said he'd return the car. I rowed out to the *Capital Gains,* ran it close to the beach end of the dock to buy gas. The price was higher than in Ensenada, plus the gas had to be carried aboard in tins, poured into the tanks, by a kid.

When he spilled a tin all over the cockpit, I took over the job, working up a sweat. Hank managed to return just as I finished, waving a bottle of scotch.

The gas stink was so bad we ate supper on the bow deck. We had a few drinks and Hank refilled his pigskin flask, tossed the empty bottle over as he said, "By this time tomorrow, I'll be guzzling champagne again."

"We've plenty to do before tomorrow comes," I said, taking out the charts. "We should be in U.S. waters by morning. I'll run close to the shore. You put on your skin diving equipment and stay in the dink, ready to slip over the second we spot a Coast Guard vessel, or as we enter port.

"In either event, once we're cleared, I'll start and stall the motors twice, your underwater signal that it's safe to come aboard or swim ashore, depending on where we are. In the afternoon, you come to the boat for your clothes, or I'll take them ashore. Okay?"

Anderson nodded. "Tonight I'll give Dr. Mino my wallet, credit cards. He'll have no trouble passing as me. I'm going to take my two thousand dollars and start another plastic factory, but on my own this time. Had my fill of dumb partners who—"

I washed the dishes and didn't listen, full of my own thoughts. With Delores alone on the island. I'd return as soon as possible, both of us busy painting and loving, I'd marry her the second Anna secured a divorce.

We'd remain on the islet forever, maybe taking a trip to Acapulco, now and then. By placing ads in the fishing magazines in the States, the Mexico City tourist papers, I'd make a few dollars charter fishing out of Rosario. I might

even sell the boat. She'd bring at least $10,000, which would last us a lifetime on the island.

Perhaps I could talk Anna into getting a Mexican divorce? It would be quicker. . . . I stopped thinking about that. It was odd: Anna had started the divorce talk, yet if I said I wanted a divorce, she'd break up. I knew Anna better than I knew myself. It would hurt her far less if she got the divorce in her own way, never knew about Delores. Time was on my side, and everything else: I had Delores and her island, Anna would have only the money I'd given her.

The tropical twilight turned to darkness fast. Hank had his flask hanging from his shoulder like a bandoleer, taking a nervous sip every few minutes, playing with his shirt collar, or rubbing his hairy fingers. Turning on the running lights, I started the engines. The gas fumes in the cockput were still strong. At eight-fifteen I took her out, steering from the pilothouse. Once we started running the breeze carried off the gas stench.

Crossing the harbor slowly, I let the motors idle on reaching the spar buoy, had Hank flash the bridge spot three times. We heard the cough of an outboard starting. Minutes later they were alongside, Delores wearing a dark parka which blended with the night. Dr. Mino had on a black business suit. He handed Hank a small suitcase, an attache case, then kissed his daughter lightly and stepped aboard.

Leaning over the side, holding the skiff away, as I pushed off, Delores touched my hand, squeezed my fingers. I waved to her.

Dr. Mino took a thick manilla envelope from an inside pocket. "Here is the passage money, four thousand dollars in fifty and one-hundred dollar bills." I shoved the envelope into my swim trunks. Mino blinked. "Captain, are you not going to count it?"

"It feels right. Hank will show you to your berth. Best you remain below until we're a few miles out. Any papers in the attache case U.S. Customs might be interested in?"

"No, merely pages of the book I have been writing. I plan to finish it in the States, some day."

"Come below, doctor," Hank said. "You can open your collar, have a drink and relax."

On the flying bridge I felt very much alive, the wake melting into a phosphorescent banner behind us. I felt like a pirate of old leaving port. Money was pressing my gut, while the hissing of my strong hull slicing the Pacific was indeed a song of adventure. Except for a few fading lights ashore, I was again in my own clean, little world.

The breeze picked up and I was wearing only swim trunks. Hearing Hank in the cockpit below, I asked him to hand me a sweatshirt.

A moment later he called, "Catch this."

"Damnit, don't throw the shirt. The wind will—" I got off the seat, stepped back, holding the wheel with one hand as I turned to look down at him.

In the dim light I had this split second view of a metalic flashing coming up at me. The side of my stupid head exploded and I felt myself falling off the flying bridge. I seemed to be tumbling endless miles into utter blackness. Somehow my mind kept clinging to one small thought: Hank Anderson had deliberately thrown the knife so the handle would hit me like a flying blackjack.

MY HEAD was being beaten with a fuel can. I guess it was the sharp gas stink which brought me around. The pounding on my noggin didn't hurt much because my head had become a kind of balloon hovering over my neck. But now and then the side of my skull became a tiny transmitting station broadcasting waves of sharp pain.

After a moment I realized I was lying on my side in the cockpit, the gas fumes from the bilge stinging me awake. The pounding was the *Capital Gains* racing at top speed through the Pacific. Both my ankles bothered me and I dimly wondered, through the pain in my head, if I'd broken my legs falling from the flying bridge. The—

My legs were grabbed and I was thrown on my back, like a boated fish. I laid there, mouth slack, eyes closed, pretending to still be out. Half opening one eye, I I saw Hank tieing a large Danforth anchor, which didn't weigh over a dozen pounds, to my ankles. He already had a thirty pound mushroom anchor fastened to my right leg. He disappeared into the cabin, probably rumaging in the rope locker for chain—anything to hold me down when he tossed me overboard.

My groggy daze lifted a little as I moved my hands, amazed he hadn't tied them yet; probably didn't expect me to ever recover consciousness. When I tried to sit up, my chest came afire with pain. Resting, I stared up at the stars. We were heading south, toward Santingo, no doubt.

I knew now that I'd been played for a sucker from the jump. Smart Hank with a few hundred bucks, looking for a seaworthy boat to reach Rosario, con Dr. Mino aboard, then head for Santingo to collect the $25,000.

He'd had a few phony checks printed and found the perfect patsy—me, broke, with the ideal boat and a simple mind. *How it all added!* Hank had slugged Kenny, with a knife throw, to keep him ashore, out of the way. Then the big spender act with the gals at Ensenada to fit his gassy yarn about his "factory" burning and being broke.

How naive could one man be-

come? I should have suspected something on finding he spoke Spanish so well, the crummy disguise with his dyed red hair, his ease on the boat, indifference to fishing, the speed with which he "found" Dr. Mino and—

Hank was coming out of the cabin, a dozen feet of light chain I'd once bought for a mooring buoy in both his hands. Kneeling at my side, he started to untangle the chain.

I made another mistake. I should have waited until he had the chain around my feet. Sucking in air, with a tremendous effort I sat up. Hank sensed the motion, lashed out with the chain. I blocked it with my left, feeling the chain snap my wrist, as my right hook whistled through the night and crumpled Hank's jaw.

He flew backwards, out cold. I screamed at the stars, yelled like a loon with the pain in my broken left wrist, the pain in the knuckles of my right hand and mostly the terrible pains in the back of my head the motion had started. I sat there for long seconds, screaming like an idiot. Somehow the yelling seemed almost restful. Then I laid the broken wrist gently across my thighs, bent forward and slowly untied my feet with my right hand.

I kept stopping to let my head settle back on my neck and it seemed hours before I worked my legs free. I got to my feet. Starting forward, my busted left touched the side of a cockpit bunk and I saw fireworks.

I came to, still on my feet, swaying with the motion of the boat and screaming at the night again, like a mad dog. Kneeling carefully, watching my left, I frisked Hank Anderson. He had the money envelope in his hip pocket, the throwing knife attached to the rear inside of his shirt collar. In the dim light from the instrument panel of the pilothouse, I saw his flask next to the wheel, which was lashed down. Throwing the knife over, I shoved the money in my trunks.

Hank's jaw was sure broken, the whole left side of his face a cockeyed swelling. He coughed, then opened his glassy eyes. Merely slapping the busted jaw with my right sent him out again.

My left didn't pain so much if I let it hang straight down. Dragging Hank by his collar, I got him to the fishing chair. Lifting him up into the chair, with one hand, was an impossible task which left me in a sweating faint several times. My entire body grew numb, which was okay: I was hardly aware of bumping my left wrist against Hank. Lashing a rope around his elbows and the back of the fishing seat was another tremendous task. When I finally had him secure, I stumbled over to the wheel and sat down.

I felt my strength slowly flowing back through the haze. I got the wheel free and swung the boat

around in a big U turn, cut our speed to reduce the gas fumes. Then I lashed the wheel and walked very carefully down into the cabin. Dr. Mino was stretched out on a berth. He was alive, but seemed in a drugged sleep, which figured.

Returning to the wheel, I set a course for Rosario. My wrist watch was still working. It was nearly midnight, meaning we were about fifty or sixty miles south of Rosario—a two-hour run at full speed. The longer I sat at the wheel the stronger I felt. I considered trying to phone the Mexican police, on the ship to shore. But I'd have to set up a story with Delores and Dr. Mino before we contacted the police, or I could be sharing a Mexican cell with Hank.

I heard this shrill, whimpering sound over the engine noises. Hank had swiveled the fishing chair around so he was facing me, eyes large with pain and fear. He was trying to talk without moving his broken jaw, the wind carrying his little sounds from me. Hank motioned with his hands for me to come over.

Steering by our flashing wake, I merely stared at him. His eyes almost leaped from their sockets as he opened his mouth, screamed, "Jim—come here."

I lashed the wheel and walked over, stopping out of kicking range, there hadn't been enough rope to tie his feet to the chair. Through clinched teeth, sweat pouring down his sharp face and over the lump which was now his chin, he mumbled, "Where we going?"

"Back to Rosario."

"Don't be a fool! The Mex government will throw us both under the jail! Jim, talking is—killing me, so listen. Go to Santingo! You'll have to gas up at Acapulco, but you can lock me below. Listen, there's twenty-five thousand dollars waiting in Santingo for handing over the doc. I—I tried for it all, but let me—go along and you —get twenty grand!"

I think I laughed. I was on top of the situation and he was offering me a deal.

"Jim, you can have it all! But put me ashore on the coast—"

"Hank, I can have the whole bundle by feeding you to the sharks, as you were going to do with me," I heard a strange voice say, which I had a hard time believing was my own, it sounded so cool. "I'm returning Dr. Mino to his island, giving him back his money. I don't know what we'll do with you—yet."

"Jerk! Twenty five grand for—"

I walked back to the wheel and sat down, cut the speed a little more, the bouncing was setting my broken wrist on fire. I could hear Hank whimpering, watched him, in the spray-splattered windshield, kicking the deck, to get my attention.

Sooner than I expected, I raised

the few lights of Rosario on my right. I came in very slowly, blowing the horn as I circled Delores' islet twice. When a light came on in her house, I came alongside the spar buoy and cut the engines, watched a flashlight moving across the pale beach, heard her outboard starting.

In the faint moonlight I watched the skiff coming towards us, a small, dark figure huddled in the stern. Snapping on the spot for a second, I saw Delores' worried face, the carbine across the lap of her dark parka. I turned the light off.

The tide was carrying us out, but otherwise the night was quiet and almost peaceful. Hank grunted, "The pain! The pain! Give me my flask! Jim, the pain is eating my brains up! The flask, please!"

I tossed the leather flask at him, the motion sending a dizzy wave of pain through my head. The rope only pinned his elbows down: Hank caught the flask, would have no trouble raising it to his lips.

Turning to watch the skiff, the windshield splintered to my left before I heard the bark of the shot. For a wild second I stared at the approaching skiff, wondering why Delores was firing at me. But I hadn't seen any gun flash from—

Ducking, as another shot cracked the windshield, I turned to see Hank Anderson holding a snub-nosed .38 with both hands. The smart son must of had it in his 'flask' case all the time! At that range, even with his elbows tied down, he could hardly miss a third time.

Without thinking, I opened the hatch with my broken left hand, jumped into the cabin as another shot sizzled by my ear. Racing through the main cabin, I was rushing into the bow cabin, raising the hatch, when the boat shook as if hit by a giant wave.

The terrific explosion sent me crashing up through the forward hatch and into the air. Turned around, I had a split-second glimpse of Dr. Mino's berth taking off like a rocket, crushing the thin face into a bloody, dead mess against the side of the hull.

I knew I was kicking my way up to the surface, lungs ready to burst. I came shooting out of the Pacific, like a marlin making its jump, into a blinding glare. The *Capital Gains* was a mass of bright flames: one of Hank's wild shots had ignited the bilge gas fumes.

I stared at the floating bonfire which had once been a hell of a boat, as a spreading wave of burning gas rippled toward me. I dived, let myself be carried with the tide, swimming underwater with my good hand and legs.

When my lungs ached I surfaced again, saw Delores standing in the skiff, shading her eyes with one hand, rifle in the other. Treading water, I waved my right hand. She put on a burst of speed, then

cut the outboard to drift near me. I tried to climb aboard. Delores grabbed my left arm to help me and I blacked out, yelling.

When I got my eyes open I was lying on the bottom of the skiff. Delores stood very straight, holding the tiller with one hand as she circled the blaze. I sat up, moving gingerly. On the edge of the ragged circle of burning gas, Hank was swimming strongly.

She asked, "My father?"

"Dead, when the boat went up. You were right; Anderson crossed us." I think I said that: I was having trouble keeping my head from orbiting again.

Delores sent the skiff in a wide circle of the flames, toward the swimmer. In the bright light we both saw a fin gracefully cutting water off Hank's left. Delores gunned the outboard.

Twenty feet from Hank, she cut the motor, picked up her carbine. The dark fin was slicing water some thirty feet back of Hank's thrashing legs. He had his face in the water, red hair like a marker. The carbine barked three times; a sluggish, dark red stain of shark blood appeared on the surface, all visible in the light from the fire.

Hank Anderson probably never knew about the shark: he raised his face for air, saw us, and began swimming off at an angle. I waited for Delores to gas the outboard, go after him. She merely stood there, silently, rifle at her shoulder.

Hank kept swimming like a racer. Maybe two dozen seconds later I saw the water ripple around Hank. He screamed once as he was pulled under. There was a lot of thrashing below the surface and then it passed. A few seconds later the Pacific was smooth as orange glass in the glow of the burning boat.

I stared up at Delores, my mouth open with admiration and awe, a chill wave of fright sweeping my guts. I knew she had deliberately killed the shark, not to save Hank, but knowing the shark blood would attract more of the beasts, finish Hank!

I heard the sounds of other boats coming out from Rosario: my blazing boat was like a beacon. I suddenly felt terribly bushed. I tried to say,

"Listen, I'm sorry about your father being killed. . . . If the police . . . Honey, it wasn't my fault . . . I was bringing him back. Two . . two deaths . . . I just run the boat. Tell the police, we were merely fishing when . . ." Talking suddenly seemed the most tiring thing I'd ever done, but before I blacked out again, I saw her lower the carbine she held on me. . . .

SUNLIGHT danced in bright, vertical slabs and for a moment I was certain I was looking through jail bars. It took me time before the room finally sharpened into focus.

I was in a bed and venetian blinds covered the large picture window. I tried to sit up but couldn't make it. The cast on my left arm weighed a ton, while there seemed to be a tight hat on my head. Merely keeping my eyes open was exhausting: I shut them.

Now something wet was on my lips. I was choking, but that passed. I managed to open my eyes, saw Delores holding a glass to my lips. She was beautiful in a white silk robe, a pleasing contrast to the golden skin. The dark eyes smiled softly down at me.

I drank something thick and cool. "Delores. The money—"

"Shh. You mustn't talk. I found the money in your trunks."

"Hank hit me on the head, took over the boat. I—I flattened him, I was bringing your father back. Dr. Mino—drugged, never knew—"

"Jim, you're very weak. Don't talk. Everything is all right."

"But Hank had this gun, hit the bilge while shooting at me.— The gas fumes—I'm sorry about your father. He died without waking, when the boat exploded!"

Her cool fingers touched my lips in gentle caress. "You need absolute rest. Doctor's orders."

Kissing her fingers, I fell off into a deep and contented sleep. Once I came to, saw a plump man with dark liver spots on his tan skin, staring at me, holding a hypodermic needle in his slim hand.

It was night, the large window full of pale moonlight and bright stars. I could hear the soothing sounds of the surf rolling up the beach. I felt great. When I sat up, I was only dizzy for a moment. My left wrist throbbed a bit in the cast. Touching the bandage on my head, I felt the stubble on my chin—I'd been in bed for at least a brace of days.

There was a glass of water on a table beside the bed. Turning to reach for it, I choked back a scream—Dr. Mino was staring down at me with piercing eyes.

It took me a second to realize I was looking at a large painting on the wall, now lit up by the moon. Staring at it, knowing Delores must have painted it, what a truly fine artist she was, the bold brush strokes—I also remembered how coldly she had killed Hank.

I put my feet slowly over the side of the bed. The tile floor was delightfully cool. I stood up. The bandages, cast and tape on my ribs felt strange.

I took a step, hit the table. I turned at a movement in the dark corner of the room, saw Delores jump off a couch. She wore a sheer, pale blue night gown, the jet black hair framing her beautiful face. Rushing across the room she said, "Jim, you should be in bed." Placing her arm around my shoulders, I was aware of the satin smoothness of her cool skin beneath the gown.

I sat on the bed. "Let's talk, honey."

"Tomorrow, Jim. You need sleep."

"What I need is to settle things, now."

Delores shrugged and it was fantastic how lovely she was. Pulling over a leather basket chair, she sat opposite me, big eyes alive with warmth in the dim light.

"How long have I been here?" I said.

"Five days. The doctor says you'll be up and around in another few days. It will take weeks before the cast can—"

"How do we stand with the police?"

"I told them you three were out fishing when the boat caught fire, that Anderson drowned. They towed the remains of your hull ashore. Poppa was buried here, three days ago. It makes a better story that way, doesn't it?"

I nodded, became dizzy. Delores said, "I'll give you money to return to the States. Later . . ."

"Baby, the boat was insured. In time I'll have over twenty thousand dollars. Delores, you're alone now. I told you before, I was coming back here after I'd taken your father to the States. But you have to know this: I'm married. However, my wife is getting a divorce. That started long before I knew you, of course. What I'm trying to say is this: we have a fine house, a topical isle. There will be money enough. I want to stay here. We can paint and—"

"Jim, you're more than welcome to remain here for as long as you like. In time, if you wish, you can buy the island."

"Honey, I guess I didn't say it right. I meant, the *two* of us here. We'll be married and live the good —" I stopped talking, had seen the startled movement of her body as she sat up.

I didn't need to look at her puzzled face.

The room was so quiet I heard the light pounding of the surf again. Then Delores said, "I'm sorry, Jim, had no idea you felt like this. The isle is yours, but I must go to Santingo, where—"

"Delores, forget about clearing the Mino name. We have paradise here, why think of leaving it?"

"Jim, I only came to your boat because I'd seen Anderson, was suspicious of his interest in Poppa."

"Your kiss didn't say that!"

"Jim, a kiss is merely a kiss. I am very fond of you, in a way. I suppose that must sound horrible; we barely know each other, really. Under different circumstances we probably could be very happy.

"But—Jim, I've been engaged, secretly, for the last three years to Chu Boleres. I lived with him in the mountains, fought at his side. I love him. I want to help him bring order to my country."

The nightmare feeling returned like a tidal wave. "But Chu, he was

going to place your father on trial, have him shot!"

"I know. As I explained, poor daddy was a symbol of the past. That was why Chu allowed him to leave and why Chu and I decided to postpone marriage. But now, with Poppa dead, my work in the Santingo underground known, I can return there, be Chu's wife."

"Oh." It came out a helpless groan, a sound reflection of the super damn fool I felt.

Delores stood up. "Jim, I'm sorry. But even if Chu wasn't waiting for me, I couldn't be happy here. Escape to a tropical isle, that's also a part of the past, a silly dream. There's so much for me to do in Santingo. We must speed up history, bring it from the feudal age to the atomic era in a few years. The mines need to be modernized, the—"

I lay down on the bed, closed my eyes as Delores talked on. I was aware of the real excitement in her voice, which had nothing to do with me. I dozed off. When I awoke dawn was lighting the horizon. Delores was asleep on the couch, still a picture of beauty. But the picture no longer aroused me.

Staring at the white ceiling, I knew I could remain here, paint sleep and swim, all I wanted to. But I also knew I wasn't a loner, that I'd leave as soon as possible. I'd had my flash rebellion, my fling at adventure. I'd had it all down the line!

When I phoned Anna from Rosario she would immediately cable me plane fare. I'd ride to La Paz, take the ferry to the air field on the mainland, be back in San Francisco within a day.

Anna had won and would never let me forget that. I'd return to poking my adding machines into other peoples' businesses, juggling their debts and credits. I would be flying back to the whole routine. The best I could do would be to buy another boat, become a weekend sailor.

The surprising and shocking thing was, although I suddenly felt old, I actually wasn't as upset as I thought I'd be.

I'd gone off on my boat like a movie-struck kid. I hadn't lost my try for adventure—my trouble was, I'd never even been in the same ring! All the time I'd merely been shadow-boxing by myself. The adventure I dreamed of has, unfortunately, vanished from our worried and punchy world. I was seventy-five years too late.

After two murders, I knew that —*now*.

A NEW COMPLETE *MIKE SHAYNE* ADVENTURE NEXT MONTH

MURDER SCHOOL

by ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

This was it, old Doc Turner knew. This was the end of the trail for him. Somewhere in that house men were haggling over a girl's life—and Murder would be the only witness.

BENEATH THE TALL, night-shadowed buildings on Morris Street, electric bulbs hung over the pushcarts. Here a miniature slope of scarlet peppers, dark green cress and creamy gourds bulging with pungent cheese was tended by a swarthy Sicilian. Next in line, a middle-aged, sloe-eyed Armenian hawked frothy laces and an assortment of rugs vivid-hued with intricate Oriental patterns.

Further along the thronged sidewalks, shawled Galician crones knowingly pinched the produce offered by a curly-haired Greek. At the curb in front of Andrew Turner's corner drugstore a round-faced Slav haggled with a bearded Hebrew patriach over a pair of suspenders.

Hucksters stood in store doorways, praising their wares. Children screamed in raucous play; trucks rumbled, buses honked insistently for passage. This was a typical Morris Street Saturday night, noisy and odorous and exotic.

From the doorway of his pharmacy, Doc Turner peered at the familiar scene out of faded blue eyes in which there was more than a hint of worry. A little, white-haired old man with kindly features, he seemed to be straining to detect, through the heavy odors of over-ripe fruit, of sweaty bodies,

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an evasive, sinister scent, like that which warns an old shepherd-dog of the wolf-pack gathering in distant hills.

A tow-headed youngster of eleven pushed through the shifting throng, eagerly offering for ten cents brightly-colored paper shopping bags.

"Hello, Jimmie," Turner called to him. "How's business?"

"Pretty good, Doc," the boy replied, grinning. "Took in a dollar-ten already tonight."

"Not bad, at all," the druggist said. "You keep that up and you'll have a substantial bank account when you grow up."

"Aw shucks. We're gonna be rich long before I grow up." Jimmy Orling's scrawny shoulders straightened. "You just wait until Sue—" he interrupted himself quickly. "I'm not supposed to say anything."

An uneasy look came into his eyes as he turned away. "Well, I got to be hustling along," he said, transferring the bags from his right hand to his left.

Doc Turner's fingers on his pipe-stem arm stopped him.

"Jimmie," the old man asked, low-toned, "what were you going to say? What's this big secret? You can trust me to keep a secret, Jimmie."

The youngster's freckled face was abruptly masklike, his frank gray eyes veiled. "Nothin', Doc. I was just shootin' off my mouth."

The youngster was squirming now, tugging to get away.

"Where has Sue been the last four or five days?" The druggist was persistent. "I haven't seen her around."

"Honest, Doc! I can't—there she is now." The girl running out of Hogbund Lane, past the drug-store window's corner-post, was slight, blonde-haired, and winsome.

"Sue!" Jimmie yelled. She stopped short, her hand going to her mouth as the youngster broke loose and bolted toward her.

What happened in the next ten seconds made Doc Turner cry out in horror and run out into the middle of the street.

Out of the side street from which Sue Orling had appeared came a stuttering rattle, like that a dozen boys might make running sticks along a picket fence. The girl clutched at her chest, swayed and slumped to the sidewalk. The running boy slumped too, just as the vicious chatter was cut off, and was replaced by the roar of a suddenly accelerating car motor.

The sprawled bodies lay less than four feet apart as Doc Turner darted past them. Someone screamed shrilly. A hundred feet down the tenement-lined street a black sedan was just completing a U-turn. In the instant Doc glimpsed it, it straightened and fled riverward, its red tail-lights blinking above a license plate so mud-spat-

tered the numbers were unreadable.

Swiftly it reached the end of the block, whipped around the corner into Pleasant Avenue, and vanished from sight.

As Doc Turner swung about, cries of pity and horror arose in a dozen different languages. He elbowed his way into the midst of the jabbering crowd, and knelt at the edge of the curb beside Sue Orling and her brother.

He could see at a glance that Jimmie was dead. No one could have lived a second after bullets had made that stitching of holes across his spine and over his heart.

Doc Turner's eyes went to the girl. Her blouse was drenched with blood and her face was ashen. But there was a faint pulse still in the wrist his fingers took hold of.

"My God, my God!" some woman wailed above him. "What a terrible thing!"

A blood-stained market bag slanted against Sue's honey-colored hair was like some caricature of a hat. The pallid face had a kind of pert prettiness, but it was far from real beauty.

Doc Turner was about to rise when he saw that the rouged lips, startlingly scarlet against clammy whiteness, were moving. He bent closer.

"Jen." It was the merest shadow of a voice that breathed the name. "Tell Jen not to—tell her it's—plain hell! The school is—is—" The voice under the old druggist's acid-stained fingers fluttered like a frightened bird. Suddenly there was no pulse at all.

"What's all this?" a gruff voice demanded. "What's going on here?" A blue-uniformed policeman pushed through the crowd.

The cop grunted, seeing what lay on the sidewalk. "Who did this?"

Turner stood up, his face very grim.

"I don't know," he said through tight lips. "I don't know yet. But I'm going to find out."

THE MORGUE VEHICLE clanged away and the swish of a street cleaner's hose, washing bloodstains from the sidewalk outside Turner's drugstore, underlay the shuffle of the dispersing crowd.

"She knew too much about someone, Jack," Doc Turner murmured. "And she was going to tell what she knew." The ball of his spatulate thumb rubbed dust from the edge of a heavy-framed showcase that once had been painted

white. "She was killed to stop her from telling."

"She was a sweet kid, and clean as a whistle." Jack Ransom's young face was somber. "She never had time for fun, holding down a typist job and making a home for Jimmie out of their two-room, cold-water flat. "I've seen her around a bit, and I can't figure her mixed up in anything off-color."

"Neither can I," the pharmacist agreed. "Not willingly, at any rate. But she had apparently become mixed up in something hot. With her last breath she tried to give me a message. Some other girl is in danger. Sue Orling gave her life to save that girl. It would be tragic if she has given it in vain."

"Which means we got to finish whatever it was for her," the policeman said. "Okay. What have we got to go on?"

"Only that it has to do with some school, I think—and that the name of the girl she wanted to warn is Jen. Find Jen and we'll find out what the school is."

"Jen," Ransom repeated, his brow wrinkling. "That won't help us much. One out of ten of the young broads around here are called that. What are we going to do—ask every one of them if she knew Sue Orling?"

"I'll do it, if there's no other way," Doc said. "But I have a feeling that we'd find out too late." His fingers drummed the showcase. "I've a feeling there's need for haste. Look here! You're just been talking about how hard Sue worked at her job. Maybe Jen is someone she worked with? If there was only some way of finding out where she worked—"

"I can tell you that," Ransom broke in. "I ran her there in my car, one morning when I happened to see her walking to work in the rain. It's the Ideal Shoe Company, that big factory down by the river. First thing tomorrow morning I'll go down there and—

"Wait!" Doc interrupted. "The Ideal Shoe. I've heard that name very recently." There was sudden excitement in his voice. "I have it. Henry Corbin, the insurance man who has desk room in Garvan's real estate office, up the block, was in here yesterday afternoon, all keyed up about selling a group life policy on all their employees. He has a list of them—if he kept a copy. Do you happen to know where he lives?"

"He's got his home address and telephone pasted on the door," Ransom said. He wheeled, strode toward the front of the store "If he's got that list I'll be back with the rest of Jen's name."

The secret door slammed behind him.

SUE AND JIMMIE Orling died at approximately seven-thirty that Saturday. It was not quite ten when Doc Turner and Jack Ransome climbed a rickety tenement

stairway, the strange, musty odor of poverty heavy in their nostrils.

On the third-floor landing, a hanging electric bulb spread wavering half-light over dingy walls and paint-peeled doors. Jack Ransom stopped at one of these.

"This is it," he said. "The widow Szibeck." The knuckles of his big fist made a hollow sound on the moisture-warped wood. "They're probably all asleep."

"I hope so," Doc murmured. He shivered a little inside his shabby topcoat. The damp chill of these never-heated halls never failed to fill him with indignation. How could slum landlords be so callous? "I hope they're all asleep, and safe."

There was a shuffling sound within the door.

"Who's there?" a woman's voice demanded. "Is that you, Jen?"

The eyes of the two men sought each other.

"It's the druggist from Morris Street, Mrs. Sziebeck," Doc called through the door. "I'd like to speak to you a minute."

A lock clicked. The door's knob rattled as it opened wide on a heavily built woman in a shabby but clean kimono, her black hair threaded with gray, her high-cheek-boned countenance gaunt to the point of emaciation.

"This is my friend, Mr. Ransom," Turner said as the two stepped past Girda Szibeck into a sparsely furnished kitchen warmed by the red glow from a coal range. "You'll have to pardon us for calling so late," Doc Turner said. "But something has come up that makes it important for us to talk with your daughter Jennie tonight."

"Jen." Mrs. Szibeck closed the hall door, and turned to face her visitors. "She is not home." Her hands, big-knuckled and harsh-skinned, plucked nervously at the hem of her wrapper.

A little muscle twitched in Doc's seamed cheek.

"When do you expect her back?" he asked gently.

"I—I do not know." The anxiety in the woman's tired eyes deepened. "She did not say. She never tells me."

"She out stepping with the boy friend?" Jack suggested hopefully.

Mrs. Szibeck shook her head. "No. She went alone."

"Ah." Doc's fingers drummed on the edge of the round table, covered with a red-checkered cloth that stood in the center of the kitchen. He was waiting for Jen's mother to ask what they wanted of her daughter. The question was in her eyes, but she did not ask it. Nor did she invite them to sit down or make any other attempt to be hospitable.

It was obvious that she wanted them to go, the quicker the better. The old pharmacist ended the uneasy silence.

"Can you tell me where Jen is?" he asked.

"No," Girda Szibeck said and he knew she lied.

Ransom knew it too.

"Damn it, Doc," he explained. "We're wasting time. "Why don't you—"

"Wait." Turner's hand on the policeman's arm prevented him from saying more. "Let me handle this." He was thinking of what Jimmie Orling had said—or rather, had failed to say—two minutes before he had been murdered.

"Mrs. Szibeck," he said. "Jen said you were not to tell anyone what she is up to. She told you that she was going to make a lot of money and that everything would be spoiled if it wasn't kept a secret. You didn't like the whole idea, but you think of yourself as a foreigner and your daughter is an American, so you decided that this affair is just another of the things that happen in this country that you don't understand. You're doing as she told you, but you're terribly worried about it. Isn't that so?"

The woman's lips moved in a barely audible, "Yes."

"Well," Doc went on, speaking softly, "a mother is a mother wherever she is. Your mother's instinct is right. Jennie is in danger. Just what the danger is, we don't know, but it was to stop her from going into it that we came here tonight. We are too late to stop her. I don't think we are too late to save her, but we will be unless we can find her quickly. Do you understand?"

Slavic stolidness still kept all expression from the widow's face, but she could not control the trembling at her lips.

"You must forget your promise to Jen," Doc urged. "You must help us to find her before it is too late. Where is she?"

"School," Mrs. Szibeck said. "School for movie."

"You mean," Ransom broke in, "a school for hookers."

"Jack!" Turner said patiently. "I told you to keep quiet." He turned back to the mother, from whose lips the color had drained. "Where is this school? Do you know?"

The woman spread her arms wide in a gesture of helplessness. "She not tell me. She say it secret, nobody must know."

"It's the old racket," Jack Ransom said. "They got hold of these kids, and tell them they've got it over the big stars fifty-seven ways in natural talent. All they need is training. One of the big companies is running a hush-hush school. All the girl has to do is go to it for awhile and—zip—she'll get starring contract for a thousand dollars a week."

"Yes," the mother agreed. "That is what Jen said."

"Sure," Jack grinned humorlessly. "Of course, just so she won't back out till the course is finished, they ask her to pay a nominal—"

"No." Mrs. Szibeck interrupted. "No. Jen did not have to pay anything. That's why it's secret, or everybody would want to go. Teach dressmaking, hair-fix—everything free.'

Doc Turner's eyes were bleak. "That's the clue that this isn't just a petty fraud model agency." He was frowning heavily. "Are you sure you can't help us find out where it is, Mrs. Szibeck? Think. Didn't Jen ever say something to you that might be of some slight help?"

Sudden excitement shone in the mother's face. "I remember now. As Jen went out, called me from stair. 'My other pocketbook, Mom,' she holler, and then she say, 'never mind. I remember.' Maybe she meant she had the address in the pocketbook she takes to work."

Magda Szibeck was already on her way to a door in the kitchen's sidewall. She left it open and her visitor's made out a double bed in the gloom of the room beyond, unoccupied, right-angled to it a smaller one on whose pillow a child's sleeping head lay. Then the woman was back, clutching an outsize, flat-sided black bag. She thrust it to Doc.

Doc took it, struggled a moment with its clasp, then had it open, spilling its contents out on the table. A cheap powder puff and rouge compact. A lacy handkerchief. Nail-file and buffer. A much-

folded, grimy movie theatre announcement.

Ransom pawed the items over, grunted. "Looks like we've drawn a blank, Doc. I—"

"What's this?" Turner's hand came out of the inside of the reticule. "Stuck in a rip in the lining." It was a slip of paper, about business-card size. The old man peered at it. "Something written—" He held it out to Ransom.

"Four thirty-seven River Avenue," the policeman read. "Hell! this can't be it. That's a radio-parts factory. She was probably trying to get a job—"

"The number is four thirty seven *and a half.*" Doc said quietly.

"Not the factory. One of those old houses in behind the factories and warehouses—the rotting old houses left over from when there was no River Avenue."

Ransom wheeled to the hall door. "Anything could be pulled off in one of those old dumps and no one would know about it. Let's go! We'll get a squad of cops and raid—"

"On what charge?" the old man asked. "The police have to have

a search warrant and no judge will issue one without some evidence that a crime is being committed on the premises."

"Okay! We'll go get the evidence!"

"Just walk in and ask for it, eh? These people will give it to us for the asking?"

Jack Ransom paused with his hand on the doorknob. "Don't tell me you're quitting, Doc."

"Hardly," Doc Turner said. He turned to Magda Szibeck, who, hand to breast, seemed bewildered by the swift exchange in a language of which her thirty years in this country had not given her full command.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "We'll take care of Jen. Come on, Jack. I have a plan. We'll talk about it on the way down."

IN A LIGHTLESS chasm whose walls were the towering, windowless rear facades of the warehouses that line River Avenue, the old houses seemed like ghosts from the past. Only here and there in the dilapidated row did any light show.

Like the wraith of some departed orchestra, faint music came from the darkest of the houses. It was the one Turner sought, and now that he was close to it he saw that the black blinds were drawn tight, to keep light from within from streaming out into the night. He skirted the apparently deserted structure.

As he came around its end, the sound of music became perceptibly louder.

"Yes," the old man murmured. I remember. These are the windows of the old ballroom."

A fleck of brightness cut the otherwise total blackness of the wall. Doc stepped short. There was a rent in the shade covering one of the wide, tall casement windows. It was high above him, but the ancient mortar had crumbled out from between the stones of the old foundation, so there were deep chinks where his fingers, his toes, found easy hold.

He did not stop when his head came level with the pane, but climbed higher until he was standing erect in the window, with his feet planted firmly on the sill.

The pulse of the music came through a hole in the grimy pane, and in rhythm with it a tapping of light feet.

"One, two, three, kick," he heard some one say. "Left turn. Right turn. Front. One, two, three, kick."

Doc shifted a little until he could see through the rent in the blind. The big, bare room was lighted by six unshaded, long-necked reading lamps placed on opposite sides of the floor. Within the square thus outlined, a row of four girls tapped and pirouetted and kicked while a tall, thin man with a face too narrow and too long counted for them.

The girls' slim young bodies

were clad only in dancing shoes, the scantiest of shorts and silken brassieres. Jen Szibeck was the smallest of the four, brown-haired, sharp-featured, lovely only because of her youth and her excitement. Doc recognized the other three. He'd sold their mothers nipples and nursing bottles and had watched them grow up.

"Right turn," the tall man chanted in time to the music of a phonograph standing just beneath the window where he was. "Front. One, two, three, kick. More pep, girls—kick! High, high, three, kick."

Two men were standing beside the phonograph, watching. Doc could see only their heads. One whose was gray-haired and thick-eared, his eyes set too close together under a narrow brow. The other's hair was sleek and black, his eyes ferretlike.

"What do you think?" the gray-haired man asked: "Pretty good stuff, hey?"

"For me, no," the other said, his intonation unmistakably Latin. "Too—how you say?—skinny. But that is the way the tourists who come to my place say Callao like them, so—" He shrugged. "You got the idea, Ramiros. The customer is always right. I'll tell Garron you'll take them."

"Not so quick. You tell him five. There are only four here." "Hell. We have five lined up for you, but one tumbled to what it was all about, and we had to fix her so she wouldn't talk. What's the difference? You save the grand you were putting out for her."

"A grand?"

"A thousand bucks. That's right, ain't it?"

"No. That is not right, Senor Dolgar. You leave me in the lurch. In the winter we are very busy and if I have only four girls I lose money." Ramiros sounded excited. "I do not like this whole affair. First you tell me I must say I am movie director, take them on tour. Then you make me come here in the night. Now you leave me in the lurch with my boat sailing in the morning. No. I say I pay five thousand for five, but for four I pay only three."

Doc Turner's throat clamped. He had encountered many different kinds of human depravity but this calm haggling over the price of human beings sickened him.

"You'll have to talk that over with the boss," he heard Dolgar say.

The phonograph squealed to a stop.

"All right, sweethearts," Garron called out. "Go get dressed and start studying your parts for the voice test. I'll phone you as soon as Mr. Ramiros is ready to watch you put on the little sketch we've worked out." He turned and started across to join the other two men.

The girls ran off, chattering, and Doc leaned against the window,

trying to see where they went. A door slammed shut. Nails screeched as an old fastening pulled loose from rotted wood and he was falling inward. He clawed at nothingness and thudded to the floor inside the room. He rolled, and lay very still, half-stunned by the fall. And only dimly awoke for a moment that a quickly drawn pistol had been leveled at his head.

"Hold it!" Garron said, coming up. "We don't want to shoot him here unless we have to." There was an ominous quiet about him that was somehow more menacing than Dolgar's enpurpled rage. "I'll keep watch on him while you take a look outside and see who else is around." His weapon was a blue-nosed automatic, but it was no more cruel-looking than his thin mouth. "Take it easy, Ramiros. He's got nothing on us—yet."

The man from Callao stood rigidly staring, his pupils dilated.

"Nothing?" he muttered as Dolgar climbed out of the window that had betrayed the druggist. "You call it nothing that he overhear what we say?"

"I don't care what he heard you say," Garron snapped. "If he's got pals outside it will be his word against ours and the girls can't testify that anything out of the way has come off here. The worst that can happen is that if he has a squad along we'll have to call our deal off. If he's alone, we won't even have to do that. We'll go through with it, just the way it's been laid out. Once we get the girls out of here, we'll have nothing more to worry about."

"*You* will have nothing to worry about," Ramiros came back. "You will have half of my money and you can clear out. But me, I will have the girls with me on my boat, and he will radio—"

"He won't radio to have you stopped, Ramiros," Garron said grimly. "Unless there's an R. C. A. station in the grave."

He looked down at Doc. "You get me, wise guy? Say. You're a funny-looking shamus! You must be one of the vice society snoopers." He kicked a stinging toe into the old man's side. "Is that what you are, grandpa?"

"It won't much matter to you what I am," Turner said, "When you pay for killing Sue Orling."

The taunting grin vanished from Garron's cruel mouth.

"I know who you are now," he said. "You're the son who popped out from behind the drugstore." His lids dropped and a small muscle at the angle of his jaw began to twitch. "I almost gunned you down then."

"You're going to be sorry you didn't," Doc said. Then the gray-haired thug, Dolgar, was standing above him.

"Not a whisper of anybody else around, Ben," he said. "We get rid of this guy and we're in the clear."

"Frisk him," the other said.

"No, wait. Stuff his mouth first with this wiper, before he takes a notion to let out a holler the girls might hear."

A POLICE PROWL car braked to a stop on River Avenue. The red-headed youth who had signaled it hopped on the running board.

"Listen," he said, "Doc Turner, the druggist from Morris Street went to deliver some medicine to one of the old brownstones in behind those four warehouses a half-hour ago. He hasn't showed up yet, and I'm scared something happened to him. This is a pretty tough block."

"The old fool!" the sergeant exclaimed. "He didn't have no business going in there alone."

"That's what I told him," Jack Ransom said. "I wanted to go along with him, but he wouldn't let me. He had his day's receipts in his wallet, too."

"You know what house he went to?"

"Sure. Four thirty-seven and a half—"

"Let's go," the sergeant barked. "Come on, Hen. We'll take a look into this."

Seconds later Ransom and the two cops trampled up the creaking front steps of 437½ River Avenue and pounded on the door.

Almost at once it was opened by a burly, gray-haired man in his shirtsleeves who didn't seem more upset over seeing them there than any innocent householder might have been.

"What's up?" he asked.

"You see anything of Doc Turner?" the sergeant asked. "Little man with white hair. He's supposed to have brought some medicine here."

Dolgar shrugged, "You got me, officer. Nobody like that's been here. Nobody's sick here, either."

"You're a liar," Jack cried. "I saw him come in here and I've been hanging around—"

"Easy," the police sergeant said. And then to Dolgar, "You don't mind if we take a look around inside, do you?"

"Cripes! We're having a little party, but go ahead."

Dolgar stepped aside and they tramped in.

Twenty minutes later they were at the door again. They had been through the old house, from top to bottom. Jack Ransom had demanded of Jen Szibeck what she was doing there and been answered by a cool-eyed, "What business is it of yours?"

They had been down to the cellar and up on the roof, and had found no trace of Andrew Turner.

"But he must be here somewhere!" Jack insisted. "I saw him go in and I didn't see him come out. They must have hidden him somewhere."

"Do you mean to tell me," the sergeant said wearily, "those girls in there would cover up a snatch,

even if these three creeps had pulled one off?"

"No." Ransom had to admit. "No, they wouldn't."

"So cut the comedy. We got some patrolling to do." He turned to Dolgar and Garron, who had accompanied them on their search.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Our friend here put us up to making so much trouble for you."

"That's all right, officer," Ben Garron said evenly. "You were just doing your duty. Good night."

The sergeant's burly shoulder jostled Ransom out of the door and it closed behind the three.

"Wait!" Ransom exclaimed, suddenly, wheeling around. He dropped to his knees on the bottom step and ran his hands over an irregularity in the wood. Then he lowered his head and sniffed.

Abruptly he straightened, grabbed the edge of the tread with both hands, and with a gigantic heave, ripped the board loose.

"Light," he demanded in a choked voice. "Shine a flashlight down in here." I thought that board had just been nailed down."

The sergeant's torch beam went into the narrow, dirt-cumbered space Ransom had uncovered.

"It's him!" Jack said, staring down: "It's Doc. He's tied up. And there's a Tommy-gun laid in there next to him."

The two cops whirled, went up the porch steps again, and pounded vigorously on the door. There was sound of running feet inside. Ransom dived past them, his shoulder ramming the ancient panel and smashing it in.

A girl screamed, a man shouted, and there was a hammer of gunfire. The cops were down on their knees, flames streaking from their guns as the two thugs fired back at them from behind the stairs.

The black-haired Ramiros ran across the line of fire, maddened by terror and went down with his hands clutching at his chest. Ben Garron spun out of the shadows, thumped into the wall, and slid down along it.

Dolgar flung his revolver away and screamed, "I give up. Don't shoot."

The silence that descended seemed almost like an explosion, so tremendous had been the thunder of gunfire that had preceded it.

As the patrolman, bleeding from a bullet-groove across his cheek, manacled the wild-eyed Dolgar, the sergeant turned to Ransom, who miraculously was unwounded.

"How did you know he was under there?" he demanded. "How the hell did you spot him?"

"I smelled him," the carrot-head grinned.

"Smelled—?"

"I smelled ether," Jack Ransom explained. "Doc never carries a gun when he's on a prowl, but he always sticks an ampul, a little

thin-walled glass bottle, in his pocket. If he gets in a jam, nobody ever bothers to take that away from him, and it has come in handy more than once. I suppose he heard us trampling around, and couldn't yell or attract our attention any other way. So he rolled over on the ampule and broke it, hoping I'd smell it when I came out. And I did."

Doc Turner confirmed that, when they had dragged him out of the cubby-hole under the stairs where he'd been stowed.

"They hid me in there until they'd have time to get the girls out," he explained. "That's why our plan almost misfired. You see, I deliberately let them capture me, so that my young friend here would have a strong enough reason to justify your invading this house. We figured that, thinking me alone, they would try to avoid gunfire that would attract attention to the place until they could get the girls out and on board Ramiros' boat. But they were almost too smart for us."

He sighed, and smiled wanly. "I know what the grave is going to be like now. The smell of mouldering earth, the darkness. I'm a tired old man, and I sometimes think it would be nice to fall asleep and never wake up again. But—I think I want to keep out of the grave for awhile. I very much think so, especially—" a twinkle came into his eyes—"especially when there are so many attractive young girls around here who need me to keep them out of trouble."

In the Next Issue—A Truly Shocking Novelet

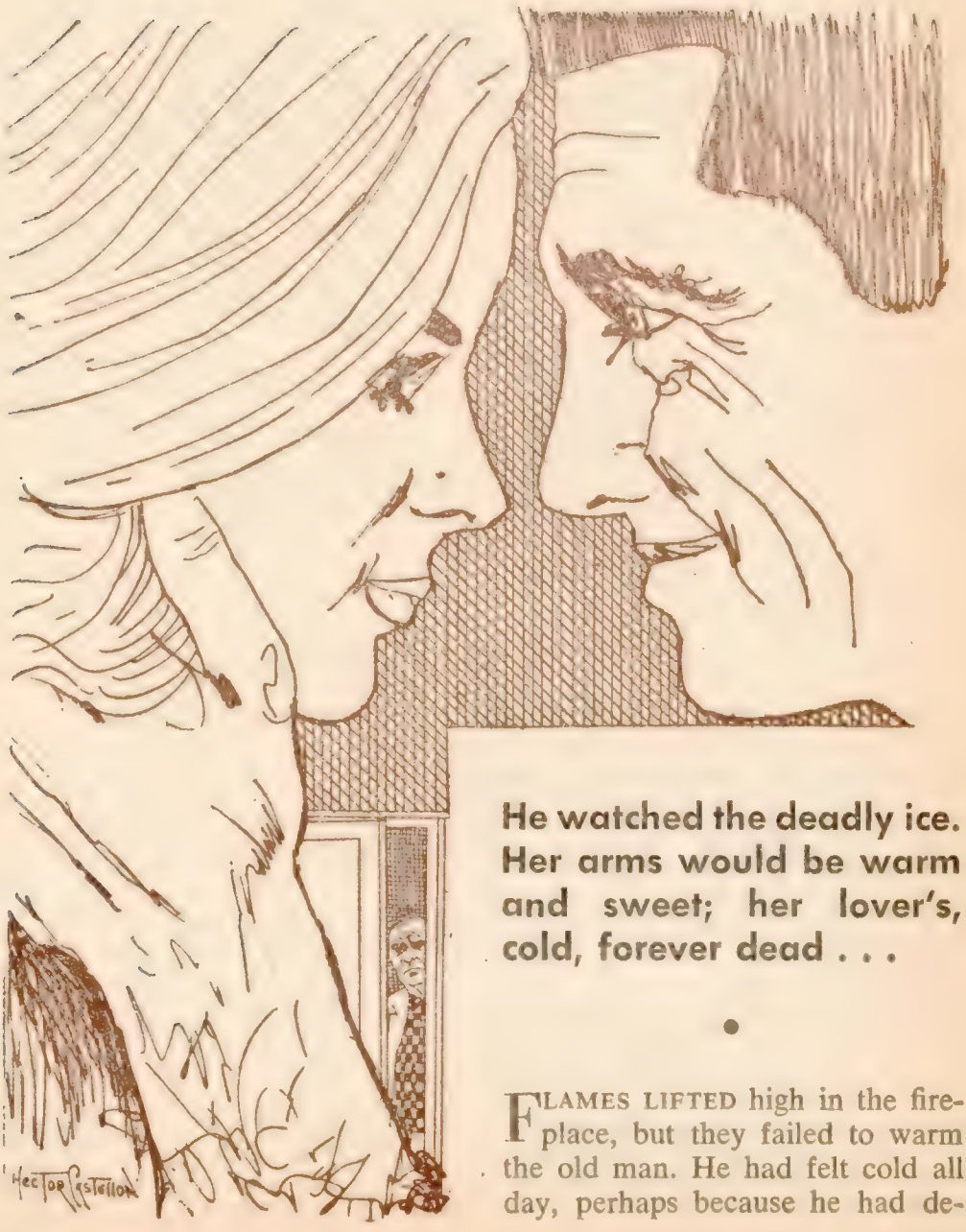
THEY MET FOR MURDER

By JAMES O'CONNOR SARGENT

Born of evil, spawned in hell, was their assignation. Never was a story more improbable, more fascinating—or more deadly—than this tale of a meeting that could end in only one way—death.

THE VISE OF ICE

by MEL ELLIS



He watched the deadly ice. Her arms would be warm and sweet; her lover's, cold, forever dead . . .

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FLAMES LIFTED high in the fireplace, but they failed to warm the old man. He had felt cold all day, perhaps because he had de-

cided to kill his best friend's son.

The son, young and handsome, had come visiting often lately. Now he sat across the table from the old man, dealing cards and trying desperately not to look at Marie, the young and beautiful woman who was the old man's wife. She lounged close to the fire holding a book, but all evening she had not turned a page.

For several months now, the old man had watched their loyalty to him plague their love for each other. He had put it down as infatuation and hoped it would end. Then this morning he had surprised them in the kitchen.

There was really nothing. They had only touched hands, but it was at the moment that he came through the door. When they turned they knew that he had seen them, and that now he surely knew, and that made all the difference.

"Well, I lost again," John Hall, the young man, said, when the hand had been played. He had lost, of course, and in more ways than one. No one ever beat Gunnar Strong, not at cards or love or making money.

"Guess I'll turn in," Hall said. "I suppose you want to hunt in the morning?"

The old man certainly did want to hunt in the morning. But this time he would not be hunting ducks. He would be hunting a man. And it would be easy, because John Hall was a neophyte duck hunter, and Gunnar Strong had been hunting all his life.

It would be easy because an Arctic cold wave was riding in on the wind, and he knew about such things and other winning combinations, in business, cards, hunting—and up until now, in love.

As he went upstairs, the old man told Hall: "We'll split up in the morning. You go north to the lake. I'll hunt the river blind. It is hard to tell which way the birds will work on this wind. If we separate, one of us is certain to get shooting."

Hall stopped on the stairs and turned. His forehead wrinkled. But all he said was: "Okay." Then he went upstairs.

"Are you going to bed?" the old man asked Marie.

"I thought I'd read awhile," she said, without looking at him.

It didn't matter. Not now.

Even in bed he felt cold, and he couldn't sleep. He should have hated John Hall. He should have felt uneasy about killing his best friend's son. He should have been torn between hate and love for his wife. He should have felt something, but he was cold and all he could think of was that he, Gunnar Strong, was old and they were young, so now he would have to kill John Hall.

The alarm clock sounded like steel wheels on hard packed and bitterly cold snow. A wind was snapping bits of ice at the window.

He knew Marie was awake, even though she remained on her side with her eyes closed.

John Hall was waiting in the kitchen. Carrying guns, lunch and shells, they walked in the white paths of their flashlights down the hill to the two skiffs.

As they poled from shore into choppy water, the old man repeated instructions, told Hall precisely where to locate his blind to be in the line of flight.

It was that easy. John Hall turned the skiff down the river toward the lake without questioning. Strong heard him put down the pole and then fit oars into the locks. He heard the oars squeak, saw the flashlight shine briefly and then he was gone.

Gunnar Strong rowed several hundred yards up the river and hid his boat in the rushes to wait. When it was over—tomorrow—he would go to Hall's father, to his best friend, and tell him how it had happened.

Then, after the funeral, Marie and he would go to Nassau or perhaps Bimini—anywhere just so it was warm, and there she would begin to forget. And she would forget, and then it could be the way it had been between them.

Strong had been right in his calculations. At dawn the wind died, and the tree-splitting cold cut down on the land and the lake, but the river flowed free.

By now John Hall would have his decoys in position and be back in the blind of reeds, waiting. Already it might be too late—for him.

Within the hour the temperature plummeted thirty degees. Strong tried to warm himself by thinking of the fire in the lodge. He tried to remember how whisky tasted, and he wished he hadn't decided against taking some along. He even tried to imagine how warm Marie's embrace might be. It was no good. He was cold, and his thoughts were not enough to warm him.

Soon it would be safe to go back. He could tell Marie that John wanted to kill a few extra ducks to take back to his father. He tested the ice. It was hardening around the boat, but a few feet out from the stern the river current kept the water open. Up where John was there would be no current.

A flock of bluebills whistled close overhead. He hadn't bothered to take the gun from the case. John would get some shooting. They would fly directly over his blind. He listened, but heard no shot.

Perhaps John already knew that the ice was closing in around him. During the hours of darkness he wouldn't have noticed. But now he would see, but now it was too late. Perhaps he had already begun to fight it. He might even now be trying to break his way out, perhaps trying to collect his decoys, but they also would be frozen fast.

Like the hundreds of duck hunters who have been trapped to die in

a like manner, he would try to break the ice with an oar. He would shout, and perhaps Marie might even hear him, and then the old man would have to make a pretense of going down to the lake, a pretense of saving him. But he would come back and tell her that it was already too late.

John Hall would sit and wait. Then, when no one came he would flail the ice with the oars and they would splinter. The time would come when he would hammer his arms across his chest to try for warmth. He would sit again, but there would be only the ducks—racing south to where it was warm.

He wouldn't give up. None do. They fight. The old man knew. He had helped collect bodies of frozen hunters sawed from Mississippi river ice twenty-five years ago and again on Devil's Marsh years later. You could tell by looking at the bodies how they had fought, but how in the end they had curled like foetuses in a womb to die.

John Hall would test the ice again and again before leaving the boat. The ice, honeycombed with coontail moss, would never hold his weight and he would flounder with the water waist deep on his waders.

He would clutch at the pencil reeds, but the ice, too thin to hold his weight, would be too thick to break a path through. He would slide on his stomach out onto the ice and break through, go down, again and again—

Strong forgot about his plight then, because he heard the kitchen door of the lodge slam. Then he heard voices. The voices sounded like those of Marie and John. But John Hall was caught, trapped by ice. He was freezing. He was dying. But that sounded like John Hall's voice!

Then he could not hear voices, but he did hear the car engine roar. He stood in the skiff in time to see the car disappear over the ridge.

Strong broke the fringe of ice in front of the skiff, and standing, poled out into the river. The current, which rarely froze, caught the craft and carried it down to the lake.

Where the ice began he drove the bow of the skiff up and onto it; then, walking forward, he crushed the ice beneath the boot with his weight. His boat was equipped for it. There was a steel keel. This was something he knew about. This was something he was sure John Hall knew nothing about.

He broke the ice with the bow

of the boat again and again until he was alongside his blind. The skiff was there, but John was not in it.

John must have left even before the ice began to form. He must have waded out minutes after coming to the lake. He must have walked in waist-deep water through the rushes in the dark. The ice in every direction was smooth and unbroken. He had left the boat even while the old man was hiding his skiff in the reeds. He had walked out to Marie and now they were gone.

Strong was deflated. He sat for a long time thinking how it was. He sat too long in the bitter cold with the ice hardening, thinking that it didn't seem right that he should have lost. Losing was something he didn't know about.

Finally he stood up and rocked the skiff to break it free of ice. But the ice had a firm grip now. It held like a vise. He moved to the bow to crush ice with his weight. The ice held. He jumped. The ice broke, but he went off balance and the skiff tipped and then he was floundering in the water.

Twice he crawled up onto the overturned skiff. Both times he slid off its icy bottom into the water. Then he couldn't climb back, probably because he wasn't sure, anymore, that there was anything to crawl back for.

Long he lay, half in and half out of the freezing water. The day was darkening though it was only mid-afternoon.

The coming darkness frightened Gunnar Strong. He crawled onto the skiff bottom and slid across it. Lest he go headfirst into the marsh, he reached out and grabbed the gunwale of John Hall's boat. It tipped toward him, and he hung there for several minutes before he saw the note tacked to the back of the skiff chair.

He could read it from where he was hanging:

If you come looking for me before Marie gets back, believe this: We didn't want it to happen. I've asked Marie to take me to town. I want to go quietly without seeing you. We have decided never to see each other again.

He reached for the note, but his hands slipped from the icy gunwale of Hall's boat. Slowly the ice broke through where the coontail moss threaded it.

He heard the car. It was Marie coming back to him.

But now it was too late.

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